EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED (EXCEPT THE GRAVES)

MZI MAHOLA
Mzi Mahola was born in 1949.

He started writing while he was at school.

After 1989 he started writing again, submitting work successfully to national and international journals, magazines and publications.

His name is also inscribed at the New Brighton Library Wall of Fame for his contribution in community development.

Mahola’s deceptively simple, lucid poetry has a deep respect for the processes of nature and for traditional wisdom.

He attributes that to his childhood in the farming communities that broadened his mental horizons by exposing him to nature, hardships and moral values.
EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED
(EXCEPT GRAVES)

I stood at the ruins

of my former school

where I was patiently moulded;

wild plants own every space now;

my soul was paralyzed

What happened to the roofs

the doors and windows?
EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED (EXCEPT GRAVES)

Can these dumb lonely walls
still recognise me?
Everything has changed;
The ground where we ran and laughed
and the corner of the playground
where I pummelled a schoolmate almost to a pulp
are scarfed with wattle
to conceal my shame.
EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED (EXCEPT GRAVES)

A short distance away
stands a renovated Church
(a Dutch Reformed formerly,
now a Methodist)
embraced by a mute little cemetery
that claims the past
EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED (EXCEPT GRAVES)

(the dividing fence has vanished)

though growth strangles it to near extinction;

cold names of departed whites who were part of this community and made monumental contributions are etched on the headstones.
EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED (EXCEPT GRAVES)

Sometimes whites come here
to clean and put flowers
on their family graves;
a voice whispers next to me
but I do not recognise its face
because Lushington has changed
except the graveyard.
I stood at the ruins of my former school where I was patiently moulded;

The poet returns to his former school that has been abandoned and has fallen into disrepair.
wild plants own every space now;
my soul was paralyzed

Weeds have taken over. It is as if these alien plants have invaded the whole area. The poet feels devastated at the total disrepair he is witnessing.
What happened to the roofs, the doors and windows?

The building has been abandoned. Vandals and thieves must have had a field day. The poet knows this, but still he remains despondent about the state the school is in.

Rhetorical Question – Poet captures his shock and surprise by asking a question that needs no answer.
Can these dumb lonely walls still recognise me?

In the years that have elapsed they have become like strangers, just like people who have not seen one another for some time. The walls are dumb – meaning they cannot speak. The walls are lonely as they are empty without any posters.

**Rhetorical Question** – Poet feels forgotten.

**Personification** – The walls are given qualities of loneliness, recall and recognition.
Everything has changed;

Despair is evident. The implication is that things have not improved— in fact they are worse.
The ground where we ran and laughed and the corner of the playground where I pummelled a schoolmate almost to a pulp are scarfed with wattle to conceal my shame.

Typical schoolboy fun - everything was uncomplicated and carefree. After so many years had elapsed the playground had shrunken to the size of a garden plot. The poet remembers the specific place where the incident occurred vividly. Fights are also part of growing up. The place where the fight took place is now hidden by a tree as a scarf would hide a face. The big tree hides the evidence of what he now sees as shameful.
A short distance away stands a renovated Church (a Dutch Reformed formerly, now a Methodist)

In contrast to the ruins of the school, the church next to the school has been upgraded and refurbished. Another sign that times have changed is the fact that a church, previously frequented by Whites, has now become a Methodist church – a more liberal denomination. Even the church, that should stand the test of time, has changed.
embraced by a mute little cemetery
that claims the past
(the dividing fence has vanished)
though growth strangles it to near extinction;

The people in the graveyard have been long dead. Their tombstones remind us of the past. Cemeteries were viewed a holy ground and thus fenced off. The vanishing of the fence is symbolic: the divide between holy and unholy, the place of death and the village has been blurred.

Personification – the cemetery is mute.
Euphemism – mute softens the idea of death.
cold names of departed whites who were part of this community and made monumental contributions are etched on the headstones.

To the poet, etching the names of the departed on headstones, is like etching them on monuments. They should never be forgotten for their contributions. They died long ago. The community has since changed to predominantly black people. Because the epitaph is carved in stone, the message does not fade or change, as everything else did.

Pun – Cold names could refer to both the corpses and the strangers of the community.
Sometimes whites come here to clean and put flowers on their family graves;

The white people, who are now outsiders to this community, visit the graves of their departed. They clear the area of weeds and put flowers on the graves. The graveyard is the only place that is looked after: this causes the poet to question what has happened to his own community.
a voice whispers next to me but I do not recognise its face because Lushington has changed except the graveyard.

Previously he had known everybody, now this person is a stranger, who in turn thinks the poet is unfamiliar with the area. The poet is disillusioned – his mental picture of his childhood village has been shattered. The poet is alarmed at the deterioration of the village and the fact that circumstances have worsened, instead of improved.