

Ezekiel Mphahlele: An Appreciation (1919-2008)

by

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When H. I. E. Dhlomo in late 1947 listed in *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper the then recently published first book by Mphahlele, a collection of short stories *Man Must Live* (1947), as one of the new talented voices that was likely to carry into the future a splendid literary culture that had a noble past, he could not have known how presciently astute his observation was as it practically predicted the trajectory of the following five decades by the man who was subsequently to write *The African Image* (1962), one of the early classics of African literary criticism. Since one of his aims was to fortify the intellectual tradition of New African creativity, Dhlomo was constantly in search of new talent in whom to inscribe the intellectual ethos of the New African Movement. This was the reason he constantly exhorted young Africans to emulate a political and cultural legacy that was destined to bring Africa back to African people from European trespassers by inventing its own particular understanding of the national project of modernity. The intellectual practice of Mphahlele that was to unfold across many decades and in the complex geo-political space of the African world had many affinities with that of Dhlomo, in that both were uncompromising in the belief that ideas not ideologies must be taken seriously, that culture must be made to supersede politics whenever possible, that form not content in an artistic work is what endures through the ages, and so on. In this sense, their distinctive nationalism was that of the politics of intellectual excellence.

For Mphahlele the politics of excellence was fully realized in the practice of scholarship through criticism. In his passion for scholarship as one of the best possible forms of politics, he can be viewed in an affiliative relationship with another quintessential New African intellectual, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi. In both of them scholarship was a form of religion. It was Clement Martyn Doke, the mentor and colleague of Vilakazi, who introduced the religiousity of scholarship into the New African Movement. In parenthesis, a possible confirmation of the adjacency between Vilakazi and Mphahlele: Mazisi Kunene constantly mentioned to this author in the 1970s and in the early 1990s in Los Angeles that Ezekiel Mphahlele, because of his humanism, intellectual integrity and intellectual seriousness, was the best intellectual within the Sophiatown Renaissance, an intellectual constellation he otherwise held in contempt because it was practiced in the English language, a language of “occupation”. This respect was mutually reciprocated, when Mazisi Kunene passed away two years ago in 2006, Mphahlele at the age of 86 traveled all the way from Lebowakgomo to Pietermaritzburg to attend the memorial service of the great poet. While Vilakazi’s scholarship was engaged with the literary history of African literature in the African languages, that of Mphahlele was focused on the contemporaneity of literary modernity of the Pan-African world: of the Harlem Renaissance, of the Negritude Movement and of African national literature(s). In this regard, of all the New African intellectuals who went into exile, at the moment of the historical termination of the New African Movement in 1960, Mphahlele was perhaps the most culturally conscious of the cosmopolitanism and internationalism of the black world. This consciousness was in all probability made possible by his

alignment with African literature in the European languages.

The singular distinction of Mphahlele was his ability to interconnect himself with the most important cultural movements in the black world in the twentieth century whose *raison d'être* was the making of cultural modernity and literary modernism. It began in the late 1930s when Peter Abrahams introduced to fellow students at St. Peter's College near Polokwane (then Pietersburg) the cultural and literary achievements of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to fellow students, among them Mphahlele himself. Abrahams' autobiography *Tell Freedom* (1954) recalls how profoundly transformative it was discovering on the shelves of Bantu Men's Social Center library in Johannesburg W. E. B. Du Bois *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1903), the essays of Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Arthur A. Schomburg, and the poetry of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay in Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (1925). Mphahlele's autobiography *Down Second Avenue* (1959) remembers the enthusiasm with which Abrahams told his fellow students that the achievements of the New Negro intellectuals were attainable too for the then upcoming young New African intellectuals. It is not surprising that when Mphahlele became the literary editor of *Drum* magazine in the mid 1950s it was this standard of excellence he wanted emulated by the coterie of fellow writers, intellectuals, and photographers. Unfortunately Mphahlele was frustrated by Jim Bailey the owner of the magazine who wanted it to be a tabloid in order that it be saleable to the majority of the partially educated working class, not to the small but well informed emergent black middle class. It was the excellence of the New Negro intellectuals, that of the English Romantics, as well as that of his predecessors within the New African Movement (particularly Solomon T. Plaatje) which he embodied that enabled him to engage on equal terms with any literary and cultural movement that he would encounter in his future intellectual trajectory.

The first formidable group of intellectuals and writers he would encounter when he went into exile in 1957 were Nigerians in Lagos, who were on the editorial board of *Black Orpheus* literary journal: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara, and Christopher Okigbo. They immediately accepted him as a fellow African writer and intellectual who was a participant in the constructing in South Africa what they themselves were in the midst of doing: creating an archive of an African national literature in the European languages (specifically English). It was highly unlikely at this time that any of the Nigerian writers and intellectuals were aware as he was of the historic importance of the Harlem Renaissance (which was the central component of the New Negro Movement) for any initiatives of black modernity in any part of the world, as much he himself was educated by the Nigerians of the achievements of the Négritude Movement of Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas and others. Although Mphahlele was critical of the Négritude Movement, he mastered the French language which was its mode of linguistic articulation. The mastery was so formidable that he translated one or two pieces from this language for the great *Transition* journal based in Kampala, a journal that facilitated the making of the profile of African national literature(s) in the European languages in East Africa where he was residing, specifically in Nairobi, Kenya. Before arriving in Nairobi in 1963, he had left Lagos for Paris in 1961, where he had the opportunity to work closely with the central literary organ of the Négritude Movement: *Présence Africaine*. Mphahlele was one of the New African intellectuals of the New African Movement who was to contribute to the most important black literary journal of the twentieth century: other South Africans also contributed

included Gerald Sekoto, Ernest Mancoba, Ernest La Guma, Lionel Ngakane, Arthur Maimane and Peter Abrahams.

In having embodied the intellectual and literary brilliance of the New African Movement, Ezekiel Mphahlele was destined to disseminate its achievements wherever his peregrinations took him. For instance, on his arrival in United States from Kenya in 1966, he arrived at the moment of the florescence of the Black Arts Movement led by Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones). Guided by the aesthetic ideology of 'Black Aesthetics', the Young Lions of the Movement like Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Maulana Karenga, Jayne Cortez, Haki Madhubuti and others, rejected the Harlem Renaissance accusing its leading lights like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes of having been aesthetically corrupted and morally compromised by white patronage. At this time our own Keorapetse Kgositsile was a full fledged member of the Black Arts Movement. Mphahlele criticized this rejection as suicidal nihilism since he believed that the cultural movement of the 1920s was not only a national event confined to the United States, but was also an international phenomenon by virtue of having influenced the Négritude Movement in Paris, the Haitian Renaissance of the 1930s, the Negrismo Movement in the same decade in Cuba, and lastly but not least, the Sophiatown Renaissance. In other words, the Harlem Renaissance was the first black cultural movement that had international implications and consequently made Harlem the capital of the black world in the first half of the twentieth century. In many ways, the intervention was tonic. What made it effective is the very fact that Mphahlele was a progressive modernizer within the New African Movement.

Although Mphahlele had always been critical of the Négritude Movement as possibly having relevance only in countries that were largely homogenously black and not those that were multiracial like South Africa, this did not prevent the development of a permanent intellectual friendship between himself and Léopold Sédar Senghor. What made this bonding possible was first and foremost their subscribing to an ideology that Mphahlele characterized as an 'African Humanism'. Perhaps another reason that made this friendship possible is the fact that Senghor had in his younger years been influenced by a classic of the New African Movement: Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka* published in Sesotho in 1925. It was translated into French in the early 1930s at the very time when both Césaire and Senghor were forging the Negritude Movement as well as searching for the historical and cultural significance of Africa in the twentieth century. This Sesotho novel was one of the few great documents from Africa, not like the ethnological writings of the German Frobenius, that helped Senghor to reorient himself to Africa away from Europe. The impact was significant enough that Senghor wrote a play based on *Chaka* that was itself called 'Chaka'. Mphahlele reinforced this reconnection with Africa.

Given these intellectual peregrinations by Mphahlele during his twenty-year exile period from 1957 to 1977, Mphahlele deserves the sobriquet of the 'Dean of the New African Movement'. His return was truly historic because he attempted to re-transplant the New African intellectual culture of the New African Movement when for all intents and purposes its historical moment had been superseded. Nonetheless, he facilitated the socio-cultural ambience in which the Public Intellectual culture of the post-apartheid era emerged. In this sense, Ezekiel Mphahlele was the fundamental linkage between the New African intellectual culture of H. I. E. Dhlomo, R. V. Selope Thema, Allan Kirkland Soga, Jordan Ngubane and others within the New African Movement in the first half of the twentieth century and

the new Public Intellectual culture of Njabulo Ndebele, Mazibuko K. Jara, Xolela Mangcu, Tiisetso Makube, William Gumede, Mondli Makhanya and others that has emerged in the first decade of the twenty first century.

Ezekiel Mphahlele was indeed the Last New African Intellectual of the New African Movement as I argued elsewhere (“Es’kia Mphahlele: The Last New African Intellectual of the New African Movement”, in *Es’kia Mphahlele: May You Grow As Big As An Elephant*, eds., Sam Raditlhalo and Taban Lo Liyong, Stainbank & Associates, Rivonia, 2006, pp. 168-210).

All of this partly explains the deep mourning by many South African newspapers as well as by the Nation that the death of this literary giant on October 27 (Monday) has elicited.

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