

THE QUESTION OF EZEKIEL MPHAHLELE: A BOOK REVIEW. [1](#)

by

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It has been difficult for any South African for the past ten years to write dispassionately and non-partisanly on the creative and critical works of Ezekiel Mphahlele or Es'kia Mphahlele. Each name designates a different historical moment: each defining a particular ensemble of complex political and literary relationships. The demarcating line was the return to South Africa of Mphahlele a decade after spending twenty-years in self-imposed exile. It is this return of the prodigal son that completely polarised and caused pandemonium among South African artists, writers, intellectuals, at home and those in exile. The group in exile has condemned Mphahlele unremittingly and in uncertain terms. In this group one can situate, among others, Lewis Nkosi, Daniel P. Kunene, Dennis Brutus and Bernard Magubane. Those back at home, which includes Dan Mattera and Nadine Gordimer, have been generally sympathetic toward Mphahlele. What this short-listing clearly indicates is that the pro-Mphahlele and contra-Mphahlele positions confounds complacent political positions and received intellectual wisdom. For instance, aligned against each other, are two Marxists or socialists: Magubane and Gordimer. Equally, aligned against each other, are two humanists: the humanism of the poet and creative writer, Dan Mattera, has positioned itself against the humanism of the literary scholar and critic, and until recently creative writer, Daniel P. Kunene. Further contradictory contrasts could be drawn, but these here are sufficient to signal the trauma the return of Mphahlele has caused in South African intellectual circles. What is missing in the above mapping of political and intellectual positions concerning the phenomenon of Mphahlele, is the position of the younger generations of South Africans, the generations represented in the later moment of *Staffrider*. Though myself not belonging to this impressive and extremely talented constellation of *Staffrider* writers and poets, in so far as never having had the privilege of appearing on its pages, I belong to this generation age wise.

What is incontrovertibly clear, and a great historical gain, is that the return of Mphahlele to South Africa has opened and founded a landscape of the cultural politics of intervention in the long revolution presently slowly, but surely, gathering tempo and velocity in South Africa today. It is the opening of the curtain camouflaging this landscape by Mphahlele, to be sure unintentionally and accidentally, that has made his return to South Africa a decisive historical moment. That Mphahlele himself has not understood the political consequences of his action, should not hinder us from drawing the necessary historical lessons.

Mphahlele has been hindered in understanding the political consequences of his action by the ideology of abstract humanism to which he wholeheartedly and blindly subscribes. If the latest literary piece from Mphahlele, the autobiography (a continuation of **Down Second Avenue**), **Afrika, My Music**, is an apologia for his journey back home, it only confirms the political philistinism of abstract humanism. Only a materialist dialectics can draw the necessary historical lessons. When Lewis Nkosi in a recent article, "South African Fiction Writers At The Barricades" (in *Third World Book Review*, vol.2 no.1 and 2, 1986), fulminates against Mphahlele, also against Miriam Tlali, Sipho Sepamla, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Lauretta Ngcobo, Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane and Richard Rive, he only confirms what in another context I have characterized as his anarchistic agnosticism. In that essay, soon hopefully to appear in *Staffrider*, I examine the triadic structure of Mphahlele's abstract humanism, Nkosi's anarchistic agnosticism and Nadine Gordimer's revolutionary socialism within the context of the *Drum* generation. [2](#) Lewis Nkosi's disastrous shortcomings, which explain his destructive literary criticism, are due to his hostility to any form of historical explanation of literary systems, poetics and processes (see, "The Discordant Voice of African Criticism", in *Third World Book Review*, vol.1 no.3, 1985). It is hardly surprising that Lewis Nkosi has been unable to grasp the political and cultural import of Mphahlele's act, even though he has been in the forefront among those fulminating against it.

Besides opening the possibilities of the new cultural politics of intervention in the developing situation in South Africa, the return of Mphahlele back home has made it possible for a whole generation of young South African writers, intellectuals, artists to retrace and re-establish the literary and cultural connections and continuities between the *Staffrider* writers and the *Drum* writers. This has been a tremendous gain on the part of the younger generations in South Africa, even if the Old Guard outside South Africa has not been able to see it as such. The wisdom of the Old Guard has been concentrating on matters more pertinent to acquiring political and state power on the behalf of the wrtched of the earth in South Africa, and not immediately focused on cultural matters. The recent essays of Mphahlele (for example, "The Wisdom of Africa: Notes on the Oral Tradition", in *Staffrider*, vol.2 no.4, 1979; "The Early Years", in *Staffrider*, vol.3 no.3, 1980; and "Literature: A Necessity or a Public Nuisance---An African View", in *The Classic*, vol.3 no.1, 1984) have assisted us South Africans of younger generations to reconstruct the cultural and literary history of our people. The point of disagreement and contention with Mphahlele has been on the political nature of that reconstruction: whereas we insist on a historical materialist perspective, Mphahlele has been content to rehash a liberal perspective, however cynically toned. The superior quality of Mphahlele's intervention, in comparison with Lewis Nkosi's mendaciousness, is beyond discussion and dispute. What is unsettling and unacceptable in some of

Mphahlele's literary work are the strands of national chauvinism against other African countries, which now and then plague his literary practice. To be sure, these strokes of nihilism are the by-products of his felt bitter experiences in these countries.

In contrast to the negativism of Lewis Nkosi, Nadine Gordimer has not ceased celebrating the return of Mphahlele to South Africa. Though in public celebrating it in historical terms (see: "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer", in *Salmagundi*, no. 62, Winter 1984), this cannot hide the fact that there deeply hidden personal passions that unrelentingly fuel this celebration (see: "An Interview", in **Sophiatown Speaks**, by the Johannesburg Junction Avenue Theater Compoany, 1986). In Nadine Gordimer's writings, both creative and critical, the public sphere and the private sphere are historically interconnected to each other. But what gives historical legitimacy to Nadine Gordimer's endorsement of Mphahlele's return, is her profound understanding of the cultural politics of intervention historically demanded of both white and black South Africans. Though the historical callings are different from each other, they find their unity in this political and cultural practice. In a brief, but profoundly penetrative essay, Nadine Gordimer argues that only the black South African writer has been able to forge a reconciliation between the demands made on the writer by society and the writer's commitment to his or her artistic vision. In the South African context, it is the conflict between the demands of society and how they should be met, that has made any activity of creativity treacherously difficult and challenging (see: "The Position of the White Writer in South Africa", in *Realities*, Spring issue, 1985?). It is the failure in his understanding of this complex issue that has made Lewis Nkosi's literary criticism the catastrophe and unmitigated disaster it is. Nadine Gordimer, this great woman, never minces words: "The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it." It is this deeply impressive perceptiveness on the part of Nadine Gordimer, beside her great artistic talent, that for posterity, that the writing of the cultural history of South Africa in the twentieth century will to a large extent influenced by the nature of her responses to the historical vicissitudes which determine the scope, depth and projection of her literary project. The unimpressive and uninspired nature of Nkosi's literary enterprise is seriously compromised by his advocacy of purism of the creative act. Nkosi's chauvanistic attacks on Miriam Tlali and Laurretta Ngcobo are the nadir of this tragic descent. The alcoholism which has cost us a literary generation, the generation of the *Drum* writers, is playing its last tragic consequences in Nkosi's literary criticism; to be sure, a criticism written with tremendous verve and literary power.

Perhaps the deep animus between Mphahlele and Nkosi is partly explained by the fact that they are among the last colossal surviving figures of the *Drum*

generation. The recent passing away of Bloke Modisane here in West Germany has narrowed the circle even further. The real and undefined object of dispute between them is the question of the proper interpretation and reconstruction of this particular literary moment, in which both of them found their literary voices. Neither of them has provided the proper historical instruments through which to grasp the literary moment of their youth. If the writings of Can Themba have been the literary signature of the *Drum* generation, then indisputably, the reportages of Henry Nxumalo possess the sociological instrumentarium with which to reconstruct this literary moment. In other words, and in effect, the dispute between them is historically unfounded, for the shaping of the cultural and literary structure, in which both of them played a fundamental role, was politically determined at the very moment of their literary emergence. It was the political voice of Nxumalo's investigative reporting that has defined the parameters of this literary movement. Despite the prodigious output of Mphahlele, both creative and literary works, they have not succeeded in dislodging the slender work of Nxumalo in giving the key words in interpreting this literary moment of *Drum*: the gigantism of Mphahlele has proven insufficient in contesting the miniaturism of Nxumalo. The re-discovery of the latter is definitely just around the corner. Mphahlele's recent booklet, **Poetry and Humanism**, exemplifies all the weaknesses that have wrought havoc in many of his writings: the absence of the sociological imagination and the presence of a skewed historical sensibility.

In this booklet, Mphahlele attempts to trace the origins of the poetic voice and humanism in oral beginnings. Points of reference range from Giotto and Erasmus through Marlowe and Herder to Goethe and Heidegger. As the names indicate, Mphahlele Humanism with Western civilization, thereby excluding in the process the contribution of Sinic civilization, as well as other civilizations, like the Amerindian and African civilizations. The sociological grounding of this historical location and evolution is never made clear. So when later in the booklet Mphahlele comes around to talking about African humanism, the implication is that the latter is a derivation of European humanism, which is defined as universal humanism. Though that could well be the case, no argumentation and reasoning is presented for this perspective. Mphahlele subordinates an African intellectual tradition to a European intellectual tradition. The problem is that whereas Mphahlele is more than enthusiastic in tracing the origins of European humanism in ancient Greek civilization, he does not attempt to look for the beginnings of African humanism in ancient Egyptian civilization. Such an attempt inside the citadel of Apartheid university system would have been a cleansing act indeed, let alone its absolute historical validity. The tracing of the possible rivalry between African humanism and European humanism would have had deep implications in the context of the developing long revolution in South Africa. The pull and tearing of South Africa from the capitalist system to the

socialist system, which has begun in serious earnest, would have found illuminating support from the academic podium. As it is, a great historical opportunity has been lost by Mphahlele. The academic acolytes, many of them of scandalous mediocrity, would have been shaken from their complacency of being, what Paul Nizan contemptuously called, the philosophical watchdogs of the established order. To be sure, the social order in South Africa is in the process of rotting away. An unremitting stream of ideological hammer-blows will undoubtedly assist in bringing about the collapse of the neo-fascist order in our country which has exerted untold suffering on our people. In his own way, with the best implements at his disposal, Mphahlele has continued hammering at the Apartheid system at the rear-guard. It is clear that Mphahlele has not compromised himself with the Apartheid by returning back home. The Old Man still has die Kraft to continue fighting. What really compromises **Poetry and Humanism** is its blissful happiness in the sunshine of bourgeois Liberal humanism, when that ideology has decayed at the dawn of a new ideological age in South Africa. The real tragedy of the phenomenon of Ezekiel Mphahlele or Es'kia Mphahlele in our cultural and literary history is his steadfast refusal to disengage himself from the false mirage of Liberalism. In the meantime, Nadine Gordimer, through development and confrontation, has shifted towards revolutionary socialism, the one real social philosophy of our century. Lewis Nkosi has led himself to the deep fall of anarchistic agnosticism. Both Mphahlele and Nkosi are our teachers and predecessors, without them we could not possibly reconstruct the central moments of our literary and cultural history.

1 A review of Es'kia Mphahlele's **Poetry and Humanism: Oral Beginnings** (Raymond Dart Lectures, Lecture 22), Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, Witwatersrand University Press, 1986, pp26. Published *Research in African Literatures* , vol.19 no.1, Spring 1988, pp.117-121. Although this essay is not a rewriting of this review, some marked alterations, especially grammatically, have been made; it retains the spirit of the latter.

2 Actually the essay was submitted to in Cape Town from West Berlin. The editor of this review mentioned that they were interested in the essay, but the matter rested there. The essay, "A Faded Intellectual Snapshot of a Disappeared Generation", is included in this collection.