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VIRTUAL 11TH ES'KIA MPHAHLELE MEMORIAL LECTURE

DELIVERED BY DR TSHEPO MADLINGOZI

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It gives me great pleasure and comfort that in adapting to the new normal of doing things differently under COVID-19 we have not as a university focused only on ensuring that the administrative and operations functions continue to operate. The academic project of the university, which is not just teaching and learning but includes research and continuous reflection, is also taken care of. The annual *Es'kia Mphahlele Memorial Lecture* is one of the major dialogues that is now well-established within the university. I am proud that you colleagues are hoisting the Mphahlele flag!

In his 2017 paper titled *Do not let him die: Celebrating the legacy of Es'kia Mphahlele*, which I referred to last year, Ndlela expresses an anxiety that scholarship on Mphahlele should not be ignored.[1] We can say as the University of South Africa that we are doing our bit to sustain scholarship on Mphahlele.

[1] Ndlela, P. (2017). Do not let him die: Celebrating the legacy of Es'kia Mphahlele. *Literator (Potchefstroom. Online)*, *38*(1), 1-7. https://dx.doi.org/10.4102.lit.v38i1.1257

We must note though that there is not enough being done broadly on that front and perhaps we should think about a more permanent idea on how to sustain the legacy of Mphahlele. Thus, in assessing whether Ndlela's anxiety is being responded to, I decided to examine briefly some of the latest scholarship on this giant. I will thereafter comment briefly on today's topic before handing over to Dr Tshepo Madlingozi to elaborate.

Recent scholarship places Mphahlele within the modernist tradition. It does so by locating his literary criticism as trans-Atlanticism and transnationalism discourses. In this regard it understands him as a pioneer in the world of letters, alongside W.E.B. Du Bois[2]. Another literary critic in his own right, Ntongela Masilela, whose memorial we hosted recently, referred to Mphahlele as 'The Dean of the New Africa Movement".[3]

For his part, Masilela also understood Mphahlele as a modernist writer, a view shared by Raditlhalo, who argues that his (Mphahlele's) drive was "to actualise the concept of African modernity without jettisoning the African in him".[4] Thus, "while Mphahlele recognised what the technologies of modernity could achieve for the developing

[2] *Ibid*

[3] Ntongela Masilela, quoted in Ojwang, D. (2011). The World that Es'kia Mphahlele Made: An East African View. *English in Africa, 38*(2), 109-120. Retrieved September 1, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23074954

[4] Raditlhalo, T. S. (2011). Mokgaga wa Maupaneng: A Tribute to Zeke (17 Dec. 1919 to 27 Oct. 2008). *English in Africa, 38*(2), 9-28. Retrieved September 1, 2020, pg. 16, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23074948

world, he disliked the basis on which the African had to be made to fit into a western mode of thinking".[5]

Like many modernist writers, Mphahlele may at times be misunderstood. For instance, in a more recent contribution, Eatough argues that Mphahlele's criticism of Negritude was a move away from 'politicised judgments' towards an 'academised form of literary criticism'.[6] This view is, however, disputed by Raditlhalo and Masilela.[7]

As Masilela points out, Mphahlele was critical of Leopold Senghor's 'biologism' while receptive of Aimé Césaire's articulation of critical consciousness amongst black people.[8] However, Eatough is correct when he observes that some of Mphahlele's writings reflect a social theory on class divisions in society, a compliment for Mphahlele, even if Eatough may wish to disagree.

Mphahlele was indeed a known Africanist, some say an African humanist who, while embracing modernity, would at the same time eschew its Eurocentric trappings and orientation.

On the other hand, Mphahlele is seen as a transnational critic. This was reflected in his interest in literature that went beyond the

[5] *Ibid*, pg. 16

[6] Eatough, M. (2019). The Critic as Modernist: Es'kia Mphahlele's Cold War Literary Criticism. *Research in African Literatures, 50*(3), 136-156. doi:10.2979/reseafrilite.50.3.10

[7] Raditlhalo, T. S. (2011). Mokgaga wa Maupaneng: A Tribute to Zeke (17 Dec. 1919 to 27 Oct.2008). *English in Africa, 38*(2), 9-28. Retrieved September 1, 2020, pg. 16, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23074948

[8] Masilela, in Raditlhalo (Ibid)

confines of his home country even before he went into exile in 1957. He sought to understand the interconnectedness of the black experience.

Pursuant to his expanding worldview, Mphahlele began corresponding with Langston Hughes, the leader of the Harlem Renaissance Movement in the 1950s.[9] The Movement was developing a "confident self-definition that was part and parcel of African-American cultural politics and artistic expression"[10], which he (Mphahlele) was "reaching out (to) across the frontiers of reference, seeking to know where it stands in relation to this or that".[11]

It must be noted of course that some have tended to overemphasise the influence of the Harlem Renaissance Movement not only on Mphahlele but also the broader black South African literary scene.[12] What the proponents of that view often fail to appreciate, is that South Africa has never been a 'blank slate' as Mangcu has argued in the case of similar overemphasis of Frantz Fanon's influence on Steve Biko.[13] Instead, linkages between African Americans and Africans on the continent should be understood against what Masilela

[9] Attwell, D (2010) Reading in the company of Es'kia Mphahlele, in Manganyi, N.C and Attwell, D (Eds) *Bury Me at the Marketplace: Es'kia Mphahlele and Company. Letters 1943-2006*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press, pgs. 9-16

[10] *Ibid*, pg. 8

[11] Mphahlele, quoted in Manganyi, N.C and Attwell, D (Eds) (ibid, pg. 8)

[12] See for instance Graham, S. (2014). Cultural Exchange in a Black Atlantic Web: South African Literature, Langston Hughes, and Negritude. *Twentieth Century Literature, 60*(4), 481-512. Retrieved September 1, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/24247101

[13] Mangcu, X. (2012) *Biko: A Biography.* Cape Town: Tafelberg.

demonstrated in the case of how Charlotte Maxeke influenced W.E.B. Du Bois, and how Du Bois in turn influenced Sol Plaatjie and "R.V. Selope Thema's theorizations on the concepts of the New African".[14]

Reaching out to the African American experience, and in fact other experiences outside South Africa, did not lead to blind idealisation. Instead, Ojwang argues that Mphahlele showed some disillusionment with early exile in Kenya; while others like Masilela were still hopeful about the newly independent countries.[15] Masemola on the other hand detects the emergence of a double consciousness in the later writings of Mphahlele after he arrived in the United States, especially in the autobiographical fiction, *The Wanderers*.[16]

The phenomenon of disillusionment and longing for home is something that we have often heard informally being narrated by most of our former exiles who were part of the liberation movement.

If the Harlem Renaissance Movement was the cultural and artistic expression of the African American world, the New African Movement was, according to Masilela, the cultural expression of the African

[14] Masilela, N. (1996) The "Black Atlantic" and African Modernity in South Africa, *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 27, Number 4, pp. 88-96, pg. 92

[15] Ojwang, D. (2011). The World that Es'kia Mphahlele Made: An East African View. *English in Africa, 38*(2), 109-120. Retrieved September 1, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23074954

[16] Masemola, K. (2012). Reverie qua worldliness in the wilderness texts: The autobiographical fiction of Es'kia Mphahlele and N. Chabani Manganyi. *Journal of African Cultural Studies, 24*(1), 55-72. Retrieved September 1, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/42005272

nationalist struggle for liberation.[17] Thus, Mphahlele should not be viewed simply from a literary angle, but from the broad lens of the liberation struggle, or expressing the conditions under which the oppressed lived. We find this in *Down Second Avenue*, in which he tells of the pain of land dispossession, the migrant labour system, and the exploitation of black labour in the urban centres.[18]

It is not possible for me to elaborate on the complexities of what it means to be modernist against criticism of the concept from an Africanist point of view, and recently by the Decolonial School. I am hoping that there will be time to engage in that criticism during the course of this session.

What I want to turn to as I move towards a conclusion, is how Dr Madlingozi may assist us to deal with what I would term the interdependencies and mutual influences between intellectual movements. In this I am asking myself how we may understand today's topic – *Decolonising "Decolonisation" with Es'kia Mphahlele*.

Could this be coming from the space that the Decolonial School has its origins in the South American academic circles and is therefore a 'foreign' school of thought? If so, what then are we saying about

[17] Masilela, N. (1996) The "Black Atlantic" and African Modernity in South Africa, *Research in African Literatures*, 27(4), pp. 88-96
[18] Mphahlele, E. (2013 [1959]) *Down Second Avenue*. London, Penguin Classics

international solidarity, and the fact that human beings have always shared ideas across continents? Aren't we talking here about Mphahlele who, as I have tried to demonstrate, shared ideas with African Americans, organised the first international African Writers conference in Paris, and participated in the Makerere Conference, where he had a lasting influence on none other than Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o?

On the other hand, one may understand where the need to decolonise "Decolonisation" comes from. By the way, what is this 'decolonisation' that we are talking about? Is it decolonisation as we got to understand it; as the liberation of African, Asian, and South American from foreign control by Europe? Is it decolonisation as postulated by Ngũgĩ, referring largely to freeing our minds and epistemologies from Eurocentric hegemony? Or is it decolonisation as postulated by the Decolonial School; as it is being advanced in the academy these days? Is there a difference to start with, between these 'three' understandings?

Whichever answer to the above questions we may advance, I can share how, as sociologists, we grappled with and eventually introduced the Dependency Theory during the late 1980s and early 1990s into the Sociology syllabus here at UNISA, difficult as it was at

the time when apartheid authorities would have liked us to only teach Functionalist Theories.

Still, the lesson we can learn from how Dependency Theory was treated is that while students got to know Andre Gunder Frank for instance, they were deprived from knowing Samir Amin, Walter Rodney, Issa Shivji and many others from the African continent and how to apply them in their own circumstances; and how Africa shaped Dependency Theory.

Those who study theology will agree with me that the same can be said about Liberation Theology and Black Theology. Many students of theology would know Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino as pioneers of Liberation Theology. They would also know James Cone as a pioneer of Black Theology. Yet, some of our students would not know Itumeleng Mosala and our own Takatso Mofokeng, who taught here at UNISA.

The lesson that I hope we may draw from these few examples is that intellectual movements develop alongside each other. They influence and shape each other. Thus, in as much as Maxeke influenced Du Bois, the latter influenced Plaatjie and others. Similarly, Mphahlele and Hughes influenced each other.

It would seem to me therefore, and perhaps this is what Dr Madlingozi will assist us to understand, that what needs to be developed is how the Decolonial School does not come to us as if we were 'blank slates', but that it draws from the rich traditions of the black radical tradition, to which African and South African writers have contributed. Surely Mphahlele was/is one of those.

Programme Director, with this rather long introduction I invite you all to welcome and learn from Dr Madlingozi.

Dr Madlingozi, welcome and thank you for agreeing to share your wisdom with us.

I thank you.