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The intersection of experience,
imaginative writing and meaning-
making in Es'kia Mphahlele

After his birth in Pretoria on 17 December 1919 followed by the formative years of his cognition at the Maupaneng village of GaMphahlele in Limpopo – as both expository and fictive writings by and on him reveal – Es'kia Mphahlele's cultural and political activism saw him grappling with identity formation as an African, including at the time he was traversing exile territories in a number of African states, in France and in America.¹ What I state here points to the three axes of experience, imaginative writing and meaning making on which Mphahlele's mission revolves as he acts it out in specific environments. That place or environment plays a major role in Mphahlele's attempts to negotiate personhood and Africanness is attested to by his description of Maupaneng times as "those highly impressionable years as a herdboy" (Mphahlele 1984: 11).

The environment in which Mphahlele lived, wrote and philosophised consists of apartheid South Africa from 1919 until 1957 when he went into exile in Nigeria; of France from 1961 to 1963; of Kenya from 1963 to 1966 when "he took up a teaching fellowship" until 1968 and began "a Ph.D. in creative writing at the University of Denver, Colorado" (Woeber and Read 1989); of Zambia from 1968 to 1970; of the 1970 to 1974 return to Denver; of continued involvement in academia at the University of Pennsylvania from 1974 to 1977; and of post-1976 apartheid South Africa since his permanent return to South Africa in August 1977.

In order to preserve the act of living and add value to it, human beings of all identity clusters act out their lives in a manner that testifies to implied meaning-making of the environment in which they live. Without making meaning of their habitat, humanity would not have survived contingent threats that accompany living. Yet a certain sector of the human population goes further than living out such apportioning of meaning to various spheres of life; they express their coherent grappling with reality in researched expressions. In Njabulo Ndebele's (1991) theory, human beings in the former category are "actors," while those not satisfied with a mere living out of the meaning they give to reality are "interpreters." Mphahlele, as is expected of the research community the world, over including the HSRC community present here, falls in the category of "interpreters."

Researchers such as James Ogude (see Mphahlele 2002), demonstrate that aspects of Mphahlele's biography permeate his fiction of all genres. Mphahlele believes in distinctive qualities of the broad cultural cluster of humanity called Africans, whose consciousness as shaped by the uniquely African historical experience defies racial barriers and includes diasporic inhabitants of the world transplanted from the African continent by cataclysmic historical incidents, if not accidents, such as slavery (Rafapa 2006). This means that his exploration of life in the macro world is repeated from the same Africanist perspective in the micro world of his fiction that pursues, within the matrix of artistic devices, the same concerns he regards as his and his people's in today's world. Such a description of Mphahlele's imaginative writing is important as it spells out the researched nature even of his fiction, emanating from his arriving at the meaning of Africanness through a process of systematic enquiry. For this reason, Mphahlele's philosophical position can be traced successfully in his fiction. This is why Rafapa (2006: 375) comes to the conclusion that Mphahlele exemplifies and clarifies further his concept of Afrikan Humanism "in the content of his narrative writings".

Mphahlele's poems written since as far back as 1960, such as "Exile in Nigeria," right through to his March 1977 poem on the Soweto uprisings "Fathers and Sons," are testimonials to the composite soul of the man who gallantly challenged a white ruling class that wanted to alienate his fellow Africans due to what he sees as the conflict relationship between European and Afrikan humanisms. There is no mistaking that the stylistically delighting crafting of his poetry and consciousness and way of life of Africans underlying it are inalienable with his view of the author as a "sensitive point" of his/her society. Being an internationally renowned poet and imaginatively amplifying the plight of oppressed blacks under apartheid intersect squarely in Mphahlele's life story.

In his 1960 poem "Exile in Nigeria," Mphahlele sighs with partial and short-lived relief because:

now my enemies are out of sight;

only distant sound of long-tongued hounds

I hear

Across the Congo and Zambesi and Limpopo. (Mphahlele 1981: 264)

This is proof that Mphahlele wrote poetry that alerted the world of apartheid horrors at a time when many compatriots may have still been lulled by the white regime's rhetoric. Without such boldness required of a researcher to confront complacent realms, cutting edge research will never be produced in any country.

One landmark in Mphahlele's strife against apartheid was his defiance of Bantu Education, which culminated in his banning from teaching in 1952. Difficulties tied to the impact of this banning led to his brief exile in 1954 in Lesotho and more pro-

longed one from 1957 in African states, Paris and America until his permanent return in 1977. The poetry of Mphahlele's autobiography spanning exile years in Africa, entitled *Afrika my Music* (1984) is much telling. It reveals that despite a fundamentally common underlying cultural matrix, at the surface level the myriad of cultural practices in these countries still left a void that could only be filled back home in the Afrikan Humanism-rich locales of black townships and villages. The neo-colonial tendencies of most if not all postcolonial regimes in these states stoked in Mphahlele a repulsion no less intense than that inflicted by apartheid conditions back home. This he describes in his creative writing by means of the potent metaphor of one running away from the "the tyranny of time" represented by apartheid back home in the South Africa of the 1950 and 1960s, only to suffer from another tyranny away from home – that of "place."

When this African wanderer was eventually drafted into American social life, what he believes to be global African consciousness continued to nag him. Life in exile as he expressed it in his poetry of the time was like "living in a glasshouse" where one watched foreign American and European cultures without being allowed to mix with and tint them with one's own African personality. This is when Mphahlele proclaimed on world stage that the right strategy to counter the pain of exile's cultural alienation was practising of poetic art by Africans of all races in an Africanist communal style. I quote from his poem "Dedication to Voices in the Whirlwind":

FOR DENNIS BRUTUS:

You stopped a fascist bullet.

FOR KGOSITSILE:

Your 'borrowed fears'

Are mine –

And so your questionings. (Mphahlele 1981: 302)

Mphahlele's (1981: 300) call for pan-Africanist communal struggle is evident in his exile poem "Vignettes," in the praise he gives to geese that "have all the years been breasting hills and winds/ the size of a whole black universe." Ruth Obee (1999: 195) attributes this style to Mphahlele's "aesthetic" and its "expression in art" which derives its inspiration from the community "while at the same time serving that community." (The reference to "a whole black universe" points to Mphahlele's Afrikan Humanist disapproval of Western-type individualism in Africans' performance of tasks.)

In the poem that pays tribute to the Soweto youths of 1976 named "Death," Mphahlele portrays the self-constituting youth as an Africanist resurrection of their forefathers' gallant spirits. Most importantly, he sarcastically contrasts such resurrection of Africa's past warriors against imperialism and colonialism with the biblical resurrection of Lazarus. The poem purports in relative terms that Lazarus's resurrection by Christ was not quite heroic, from the point of view of agency, as it was without much

effort on the part of Lazarus. On the other hand, the arduous enterprise of Soweto youth in resurrecting the warrior blood of their forebears bears all the hallmarks of martyrdom. Of course, this is when both the poem and the bible are interrogated as fountains of national narratives woven together by myth, and the faith dimension is suspended as should be in unfettered, imaginative writing. Such a de-linking of belief and rigorous enquiry is essential in any kind of research.

As soon as we recognise that the plots of Mphahlele's fiction unfurl "within a spiritual terrain contested by western Christianity and traditional African religions" (Rafapa 2007: 102), and that Afrikan Humanism includes Africans' abrogation of western Christianity, we shall appreciate that this poem is an advancement of Mphahlele's well-researched theory of Afrikan Humanism, thus pointing to evidence of much-needed consistency and steadfastness in the enterprise of academic enquiry.

Es'kia Mphahlele's development of his concept of Afrikan Humanism ever since he started attempts as a pre-school boy to make meaning of reality have both responded to and overtaken similar attempts by fellow Africans such as Timothy Kandeke, Justin Zulu and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. While ideas such as *botho / vhuthu / vunhu / ubuntu*, African Unity, African renaissance, rainbow nation, moral regeneration and *batho pele* are, in their refined form, aspects of Mphahlele's constellation of features called Afrikan Humanism, each of these is but a narrower, less nuanced aspect of his broader concept.

Researchers, especially black researchers in the human and social sciences within our new democracy in South Africa, can draw inspiration from Mphahlele's research output and rewards. It is clear from examples given above that South Africans, especially blacks, can come to terms with as well as heave themselves out of the cesspit of poverty, amorality, lack of self-reliance, social alienation, assimilating globalisation and impoverishingly blurred identity by paying attention to research as well as proper, academic representation of research results. As a young boy brought up harshly in the unfriendly apartheid milieu of around the 1929 Great Depression, Mphahlele was armed to survive the spiritual brokenness prescribed for him and his people through a conscious, scientific analysis of life and society. This survival kit consisting of research drive and skills is the stock in trade of all researchers, and should be the pursuit also of interns going through the HSRC's Researcher Development Programme named after this great asset of world knowledge and illustrious son of the African soil, Es'kia Mphahlele.

Mphahlele's expository publications can be traced as far back as 1949 when as a student he published "The Unfinished Story" in a Unisa journal (Rafapa 2006). Right from these early beginnings his voice proved to fill a void left by Eurocentric research in describing aspects of African thought and lifestyles. His uniquely African sensibility could not but open his eyes to the pertinence of 19th century attempts at formulating the idea of Pan Africanism – by Africans who interpreted reality from the African-

American vantage point, such as Alexander Crummel and Edward Wilmot Blyden (see Mphahlele 2002). The co-existing Pan Africanist and Black Consciousness currents of the 1930s and 1940s in the black world globally found lucid responses in Mphahlele's research reports, in the form of journal articles of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. That is, while writing the poems cited above in which he grapples with these concerns, he simultaneously employed academic writing to enhance ambient Pan Africanist and Black Consciousness debates.

Not only did Mphahlele respond in bold stroke to the blanket thinking trends of Pan Africanism and Black Consciousness. He also displayed an eye for detail as he dialectically transformed, reconstructed and moulded theorising attempts by specific movements such as African-American Black Power and Francophone Africa's *négritude*. It is gratifying to study the HSRC's policy documents and see that the researcher development internship programme they are launching today is designed in such a way that it equips future researchers with the same skill not to elevate the generic at the expense of the specific. This is not to deny the epistemological need to probe fundamental parallels in any number of phenomena connected in time and space.

Mphahlele would not be compatible with such homogenisation and totalisation. The circumspect nature of his concept of Afrikan Humanism leads by the example. One of the premises of Mphahlele's theory of Afrikan Humanism is that of distilling and characterising the underlying consciousness connecting African cultures while at the same time conceding to superficial intra-ethnic differences that should confederally strengthen Africanist nationalism rather than hamper it (see Mphahlele 2002: 252). Hence his known emphasis on the need to distinguish negative tribalism from positive ethnic identity.

Over the three decades alone, i.e. the 1950s to the 1970s, Mphahlele produced no less than 140 articles, including "The Syllabus and the Child" (1952), "What the South African Negro Reads and Writes" (1957), "The Dilemma of the African Elite" (1959), "A Pan-African Drive against Verwoerd" (1961), "The Fabric of African Cultures" (1964), "Contemporary African Literature" (1969), "Back to Ancestral Ground" (1977), and "Exile, the Tyranny of Place and the Literary Compromise" (1979) – all documented in Catherine Woeber and John Read's *Es'kia Mphahlele. A Bibliography* (1989). Mphahlele's book-length publication of 1962 (revised in 1974), *The African Image*, explores the African personality in a remarkably nuanced manner typical of his incisive interrogation of the African identity. His 1980s research output includes "Education: A Handicap we Share with Whites" (1982) (see Woeber and Read 1989). One of his 1990s philosophical pieces is "African Humanism and the Corporate World" (1994) (see Mphahlele 2002). The chequered canvas over which Mphahlele spreads his idea of Afrikan Humanism, betrayed by the diversity of topics shown by the titles of these essays, is in keeping with the feature of this idea of seeping into all spheres of life and

re-inventing itself from time to time in order to accommodate the challenges of day to day living. This social scientist continues in the 21st century to research and communicate the gains of research, as evidenced by essays like "Africa in Exile" (2000) and "A Dreamer in a Continent of Tongues" (2000) (see Mphahlele 2002).

In keeping with the feature of his concept of Afrikan Humanism countering an elitist intellectualism that separates the world of ideas from that of practice (Rafapa 2006), Mphahlele has worked hard on projects that were meant to advance African communities across the continent. Researchers will agree that immense mental effort, as in research projects, is required in the conceptualisation of developmental projects. Developmental projects are perhaps nothing more than the empirical application of earlier research results or concretisation of applied research. What one then adds to the repertoire of skills in order to reach goals set for developmental projects is capacity for project management – requiring knowledge of event management, mentoring, human resource management, assessment, etc.

Using the impetus of his mental construct called Afrikan Humanism, among others Mphahlele was instrumental in the founding of Mbari Writers and Artists Club in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1961. As Director of the Chemchemi Creative Centre in Nairobi, Kenya in 1963, he worked hard to broaden and deepen his attempts at empowering cultural practitioners with backgrounds of colonial deprivation. His and some contemporary African intellectuals' efforts tapped dazzling talent that was informed by Africanist self-definition. In 1983 he established the Council of Black Education and Research in Soweto, through which research and academic skills of many blacks with a disadvantaged background were developed within an Afrocentric frame of reference. Today the Africanist moorings and noble objectives such as those encapsulated in examples of programs mentioned above appear poised to be hatched, nurtured and sustained by the Es'kia Institute under the current leadership of CEO Mr Mike Stainbank and the effective patronage of Es'kia Mphahlele himself.

The Human Sciences Research Council, through commendable programmes such as the one launched today to transform interns into well-oriented and well-equipped African researchers, has the potential to continue the enquiring legacy of African scholars such as Es'kia Mphahlele to the benefit of all in South Africa's teenager democracy. However, true to the spirit of Es'kia Mphahlele's philosophy of Afrikan Humanism, the survival, transformative integration and multicultural self-constitution of all who live in South Africa today could benefit more if potential partners such as the Es'kia Institute and HSRC forged together and saw to fruition collaborative programmes. Whatever direction the future of research may take in South Africa, the Es'kia Mphahlele Researcher Development Programme appears to be a worthy and auspicious tone-setter.

I congratulate the HSRC for ably setting in motion this training. I thank you.

Note

- 1 This is a slightly modified version of a presentation delivered on 26 October 2007 at the launch of the Es'kia Mphahlele Researcher Development Programme supported by the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria. I thank the Director of Capacity Development, Prof Mukole Kongolo, at the HSRC for his invitation to deliver this talk.

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