



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

THE 10TH ES'KIA MPHAHLELE MEMORIAL LECTURE

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In his 1980 article titled *The Humanism of Ezekiel Mphahlele*, Samuel Omo Asein argues that:

There are few African writers who have contributed much to the development of modern African literature and have had little written about them. Of the few, the black South African writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, stands out rather pathetically as a much negligence, generally underestimated and often misjudged writer.¹

¹ Asein, Simon O (1980) *The Humanism of Ezekiel Mphahlele*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Volume 15, Issue 1, pp. 38-49

Asein then goes on to mention some of Mphahlele's seminal works, before adding some general information on how Mphahlele dedicated his life to developing African literature to be the respected genre that it is today.

Commenting on Asein's argument, Phil Ndlela makes a pointed observation and places down a challenge when he wrote the following two years ago, and I wish to quote him at some length:

Asein's concerns cannot be dismissed as obsolete or unwarranted. They are as relevant today as they were when he conceived them. There is still a lot of work to be done by us academics in terms of giving due prominence to Mphahlele's immense literary and scholarly output by way of prescribing it in our literary studies courses at universities. Even the laudable initiative that culminated in the establishment of the Es'kia Institute was his brain child. It would be interesting to know the number of departments of English literature that prescribe and teach Mphahlele's works in South Africa. It would also be interesting to know how many of our Provincial and National Departments of Education have included Mphahlele's works in the curriculum.²

² Ndlela, Phil (2017) Do not let him die: Celebrating the legacy of Es'kia Mphahlele, *Literator*, Volume 38, Number 1, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2219-82372017000100020 (Accessed on 25 September 2019)

A search for academic work on Mphahlele reveals that whereas there has been a marked improvement on the focus on Mphahlele's work since Asein made his observations, there remains a huge scope that can be done for us to gain a deeper appreciation of Mphahlele's contribution. This can be attributed to two factors.

First, there continues to be a general neglect of African epistemologies in general, including the literary works and contributions of giants like Mphahlele. Hence the pertinent argument advanced by Ndlela. That even at university level there is a dearth of focus on African literary figures.

The second factor that we might think of is the limits and pitfalls of disciplinarity. And this does not only affect Mphahlele. Many literary figures have their works that touch on politics, history, sociology, and political economy, ignored simply because they are not categorised as such when they are published. For instance, despite producing many works that address the history, politics and political economy of post-independent Kenya in particular, and the state of neo-colonialism in Africa in general, Ngugi wa Thiongo is still narrowly regarded mainly, and in some cases solely as a literary figure.

The same can be said about Mphahlele. Despite being one of the foremost theoreticians of what has come to be known as African

Humanism, Mphahlele, just like Ngugi, suffers the fate of being confined to literary studies.

It is this confinement that we at Unisa have for the past decade sought to address, through having the Annual Es'kia Mphahlele Memorial Lecture. This series of lectures assist us to demonstrate that whereas he used the medium of literature and literary studies, Mphahlele was more than just a literary figure.

It is the broader scope of Mphahlele's thought, and to his articulation of African Humanism that I wish to turn to as my introduction for Dr Khoza's lecture.

Throughout his work, and in self-description, Mphahlele talks about African Humanism, and him being an African Humanist.³ His is a journey started many years when he undertook his studies through UNISA, completing his doctorate in the USA, and expressed in his writings.

It is worth noting that at the time when Mphahlele embarked on a journey to frame what he called African Humanism, he was doing so at the time when Leopold Senghor was writing about Negritude,

³ Mphahlele, Es'kia (2002) *Es'kia: Education, African Humanism and Culture, Social Consciousness, Literary Appreciation*. Johannesburg, Kwela Books

Kenneth Kaunda was writing about Humanism, Aime Cesaire was writing about decolonisation, and Frantz Fanon was examining the effect of colonialism on the self-esteem of the black person.

Here at home, Anton Lembede had already introduced radical African Nationalism, which was to be taken forward by Robert Sobukwe when he linked that to the broader struggles of the African peoples and thus introduced Pan-Africanism in South Africa. These efforts were to find further expression in the writings of Steve Biko when he articulated the philosophy of Black Consciousness.

Located within this development of radical and progressive schools of thought which sought, first, to understand the condition of the oppressed, and, second, to formulate ways in which the people could free themselves, Mphahlele can be understood to have developed his thoughts to be more than just literary contributions.

Over the years, these articulations of African Humanism have found expression in what is now firmly known especially within the study of Philosophy as *Ubuntu/Botho*.

As Rob Gaylard observes, while there might be some similarities between 'humanism' in its Western form, as would be the case with

thoughts shared by humanity as a whole, there are distinct features that are unique to *ubuntu/botho*, or African Humanism.⁴

Ubuntu/botho, anchors who we are as a people; as human beings. For Mogobe Ramose, there is an intractable and unbroken link to *umuntu/motho* as an ontological expression.⁵ There cannot be *ubuntu/botho* without the central place taken by and there being respect for *umuntu/motho*. As such, “*ubuntu* then is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology”.⁶

But where am I going with this, and how does it then relate to Mphahlele?

The country has recently gone through a disturbing wave of high-profile cases of gender-based violence. I say high profile because there are many other cases of ordinary women in our townships and rural areas whose death in the hands of their partners and other men, do not receive wide media coverage purely because of their working-class status. These are the forgotten, in many cases hidden, statistics of this shame that is covering our nation.

⁴ Gaylard, Rob (2007) “Welcome to the world of our humanity”: (African) humanism, ubuntu and black South African writing, *Journal of Literary Studies*, Volume 20, Issue 3-4, pp. 265-282

⁵ Ramose, Mogobe B (2003) The philosophy of ubuntu and ubuntu as a philosophy, in Coetzee, P.H and Roux, A.P.J, *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings*. Cape Town, Oxford University Press

⁶ Ibid, pg. 230

Besides the sociological explanations that we may provide, which are of course correct, for the scourge of femicide and gender-based violence in our country, there should be other reasons why we are experiencing this as a country.

It is my submission, based on and drawing from Frantz Fanon's characterisation of the dehumanisation of the oppressed as relegating them to the 'zone of non-beings'⁷ that some of the answers to the femicide and gender-based violence that we are experiencing can be linked to some of the men who commit these atrocious deeds having lost their humanity (*ubuntu/botho*), and indeed not respecting the humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) of others.

In the mother language of Mphahlele we are therefore asking: "*Botho bo kae?*" (where is our humanity in all this?). And we turn around and answer ourselves: "*Botho bo tsamaile!*" (we have lost our humanity). It is this critical self-searching, over and above identification and addressing of socio-economic causes of femicide and gender-based violence, and in addition to strengthening our criminal justice system, that we must, as a people, try to find answers to the challenges of our times.

⁷ Fanon, Frantz ([1952] 1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*. London, Pluto Press

At the core of our attempts to address this and many other societal challenges should be our quest to place the Humanism that Mphahlele talked about – African Humanism. It is this Humanism, *ubuntu/botho*, which can firmly anchor our quest for a decolonised higher education system that is ‘in the service for all of humanity’.

As we have articulated at many other platforms, ours is a challenge and duty to decolonise our universities. This is not limited to the content of what we teach and research on, that is, our curriculum and research output.

Decolonisation involves the culture that is cultivated and promoted in our universities. It involves discarding the culture of violence that is characteristic of coloniality, which is a culture of ‘othering’. A culture of seeing the ‘other’ as not only different, but of being inferior and therefore deserving of ill-treatment, to a point of being violated in various ways.

We should therefore, Programme Director, be able to see the links between what is happening in the society, the heritage and tools that giants like Mphahlele have bequeathed on us, which is African Humanism, *ubuntu/botho*, and our ability to decolonise our universities; and dare I say, society as a whole.

This finally brings me to the theme of transformation which Dr Khoza will address us on.

In his lecture Dr Khoza will explore themes of leadership, the type of leadership, in the era of and as it relates to transformation.

As an institution, through resolutions of Council and the various instruments that we have developed and adopted, we have argued that the ultimate aim of our transformation journey should be to rehumanise our university, and by extension our society.

It is through this approach, which we learn from Mphahlele that, I think, we will be able to produce and be led by a leadership that is responsible, accountable and ethical.

On behalf of the Council, Management and Students of the University of South Africa I welcome you to this 10th Es'kia Mphahlele Memorial Lecture.

Thank you!