

# Decolonising ‘Decolonisation’ With Mphahlele



Es'kia Mphahlele - Ills.:  
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*Es'kia Mphahlele was a writer, activist, organiser and teacher committed to the view that 'Afrikan humanness' is the real key to our freedom.*

*This week marks the 10th anniversary of Es'kia Mphahlele's death.*

Mphahlele (1919-2008) was a writer of fiction, a journalist, a cultural activist, an organiser and, above all, a teacher. The main aim of his fiction and non-fiction work was dealing with what he characterised as the “first exile” - from home culture and ways of understanding the world - from which victims of colonisation suffered. Mphahlele argued that colonised people should begin by overcoming “first exile” if they are to develop decolonising theories and practices. In an era in which the decolonisation of politics and knowledge has captured the imagination of many people, we would do well to recall Mphahlele's work.

The focus on “first exile” is important because the ultimate aim of colonisation is to separate colonised people from their sources of economic autonomy, ways of understanding the world, and, ultimately, from themselves. The primary “spiritual striving” of victims of colonisation, not just colonialism, is a striving against what the great African-American intellectual WEB du Bois called double consciousness. Similar ideas were developed closer to home. Writing in the 1940s, HIE Dhlomo explained that successfully colonised individuals are ‘neither-nor’ characters who “are neither wholly African nor fully Europeanised”. Dhlomo showed that the double consciousness of these characters was evident in their use of “European measuring rods for success, culture, goodness, greatness”.

In a settler colonial context, the work of colonisation would be achieved when leaders of the colonised people calibrate their demands to Western-style multiparty democracy, civil rights and, therefore, the integration of the elite layer of the colonised people into the historically white world. In such a context, the world and privileges of the settler minority are legitimised and guaranteed, while ‘uncivilised’ people, the majority of the population, continue to exist on the underside of the new society.

*When the ‘decolonial’ is fundamentally shaped by the colonial*

But not all projects of self-determination take the lived experiences and ideas of this majority seriously. Some are attached to colonialist ideas or obsessed with whiteness, leading to ‘radical’ projects that recenter what they aim to challenge.

In the first case, seemingly decolonial projects repeat colonialist ideas about the inherent differences between black and white; the uniqueness of ‘black culture’ and its supposedly essential traits; and the need to retrieve ‘native’ discourses; forgetting that ‘the native’ comes into being only when the settler arrives and that ‘native’ discourse is constituted by what Congolese philosopher VY Mudimbe calls the “colonial library” – colonial experts of various kinds.

In the second case, the black radical’s ‘colonial mentality’ manifests in projects whose main aim is to shame historical colonisers by constantly repeating anti-black discourses that the black man is not human and cannot coexist with humanity. This trend can be seen in certain strands of Afro-pessimism.

The important point here is that decolonisation often needs to be decolonised itself. In South Africa, no other thinker grappled with this dilemma more than Mphahlele.

*‘Being born black in this country ... is a political event’*

Mphahlele’s life and thoughts span the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid eras. He is a premier theorist on the predicaments facing “neither-nor” elites. Mphahlele showed that the problem of ‘colonial mentality’ could be surmounted only by a genuine, if painful, voyage into the self. It is this voyage that enables what Amílcar Cabral called the “return to the source”.

Mphahlele has described his life as one of “exiles and homecomings”. At the age of five, he was wrenched from the urban life of Marabastad and taken to a “black reserve” on barren land in a rural area. A few years later, he was taken back to

Marabastad. This childhood experience impressed upon him a duality and an ambivalence that would constitute a “never-ending dialogue” between his rural and urban streams of consciousness. Mphahlele’s main philosophical contribution was, firstly, to demonstrate that colonised persons are saddled with two layers of hybridity: the often-disagreeable negotiation between the ancestral spirit and the urban-setting sensibility, and the tug-of-war between the ancestral and Western consciousnesses. In his philosophical and creative writings, Mphahlele demonstrated the many ramifications of these dizzying forms of hybridity: “Ambivalence, ambivalence. Always having to maintain equilibrium. You walk with this double personality as a colonised man ... The pendulum swings between revulsion and attraction ... Ambivalence.”

Like many colonised people, Mphahlele thought the only way he could overcome this enervating sense of ambivalence was to master the tools of Western modernity and assimilate into the white world. In 1935, he received a scholarship to study at a prestigious Christian mission school for black students. But Mphahlele soon realised the journey and process of receiving Western education led to another form of homelessness and, as a result, increased spiritual restlessness. Aligning himself with the theme of *Ambiguous Adventure*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s acclaimed novel, Mphahlele wrote that journeying into this new world was similar to undertaking “an adventure into the night”.

The process of receiving a Western education helped Mphahlele not only to master the tools of Western modernity, but also to begin to subject colonialist discourse to intense scrutiny, and in the process, re-evaluate himself and the world. Mphahlele observed that the further he progressed with Western education, the more he developed intellectual apparatuses to question some of the myths of Christianity and European civilisation. When he turned 21, Mphahlele abandoned Christianity and became a non-believer.

Mphahlele’s initial radicalism is evident in the slant he adopted when he co-founded an independent African-run newspaper, *The Voice of Africa*, or simply *The Voice*, which was explicitly African nationalist, in 1949. *The Voice* exposed the hypocrisy of white liberals and criticised the ANC for being elitist and assimilationist. Mphahlele and his co-editors anticipated one of the central tenets of Black Consciousness by rejecting a reformist vision in which “both races can live in this country peacefully, not as masters and servants, but as partners, the white race playing the role of senior partner”. Mphahlele and his co-editors also

rejected the emergent politics of nativism encapsulated in the slogan, “Africa for Africans”. Rather, they advocated for cooperation and unity among all oppressed peoples, including people classified as Indians and coloureds. Not to be mistaken for assimilated intellectuals, Mphahlele and his co-editors combined this rejection of the politics of radical alterity with a disavowal of the myths of colonisation. From 1951, Mphahlele penned a five-part series titled “What it means to be a black man”, in which he dismissed the moralising pretences of Western civilisation by exposing the ways in which the South African legal system subjugated black people.

### *Self-imposed exile*

The apartheid authorities dismissed Mphahlele from his teaching job when he mobilised against the Bantu Education Act. After this, *The Voice* stopped being circulated. This prompted Mphahlele to undertake his first journey into physical exile, taking up a teaching post in Lesotho in 1954. He returned to South Africa in 1955, obtaining a masters degree in English with distinction. His dissertation was a critique of representations of black and white characters in South African literature.

Barred from teaching, Mphahlele joined *Drum* magazine as a fiction editor, subeditor and political reporter, but he never became part of the *Drum* gang. He quit the magazine after two years because he regarded the bohemian, multiracial and interracial life on the border of the black world and the white world to be idealistic and meaningless. The *Drum* gang acted as if apartheid did not exist, as if racial categorisation did not exist, and consequently often ridiculed overt political mobilisation. In the context of apartheid, this kind of interstitial living got the colonised only so far because it shied away from confronting questions of identity, double consciousness, ambivalence and non-belonging.

For one whose consciousness had been raised, the only possibility that remained was to mobilise politically to try to bring about political change. But Mphahlele’s involvement in the ANC’s politics of integration convinced him that such politics recentered white people and would never result in meaningful change. He took up a teaching post in Nigeria. This act of self-exile began a 20-year period in which he sought belonging and spiritual succour in a proudly black diasporan world, in which he was involved in all major moments of constitution and becoming. He was involved in the Sophiatown renaissance in Johannesburg in the 1950s; the West African Anglophone cultural renaissance in the late 1950s, when he was teaching

and writing in Nigeria; the Négritude movement, when he was a director of an international cultural centre in Paris in the 1960s; and in the Black Arts movement and “negro literature” when he was a professor of literature in the United States in the early 1970s. In all these engagements, Mphahlele launched trenchant critiques of “black radicalism” and various projects of epistemic and political self-determination. It could be said that Mphahlele’s chief preoccupation was to decolonise decolonisation.

While teaching, coediting an African literary magazine and mobilising against apartheid, Mphahlele wrote his most significant work of non-fiction, *African Image* (1962). His intentions with this book were to engage in self-determination to redefine the terms of engagement between himself and colonists. *African Image* aimed to deconstruct the false image colonialist discourse had imposed on Africa and Africans. More importantly, Mphahlele wished to offer a demystified notion of Africanness. *African Image* contains one of the first sustained critiques of the Négritude movement and the dominant strand of Pan-Africanism at the time. Mphahlele observed that these Négritude and Pan-African leaders were engaged in a process of “auto-colonising” the non-elite majority by elaborating a static notion of “African culture”. Rather than learning from the unassimilated majority, “the source”, these elites deployed an aggressive, anti-Western discourse that was nevertheless a colonialist discourse because it was based on “anthropological creepy crawlies”.

Mphahlele’s main publication in the US was a collection of essays that engaged critically with the dilemma of whether Americans of African descent should seek a cultural and symbolic return to Africa, or assert their identity as black Americans. The crux of his argument in *Voices in the Whirlwind* (1973) was that black Americans must seek their self-realisation in the US. But he feared that most black poetry was excessively bitter and too focused on protest to enable this.

### *Mphahlele’s decolonising vision*

In 1977, Mphahlele and his wife, Rebecca, ended their 21 years of self-exile and returned to apartheid South Africa. The main impulse behind Mphahlele’s decision to return was his realisation that the only durable way an alienated person could deal with the state of self-alienation and double consciousness was by ‘returning to the source’. Mphahlele put his efforts into teaching, hosting writing workshops, and other conscientisation processes. He cofounded black people-only programmes, including the Pan-African Writers Association and the

Council for Black Education and Research, which were explicitly inspired by the Black Consciousness movement. These programmes aimed to showcase and cultivate black self-reliance, self-pride and self-determination, and thus shift black people's consciousness beyond the poetics of bitterness and hatred of white people. Mphahlele argued that the process of Africanising academic curricula needed to start at the school level, and that its main philosophical basis had to be 'Afrikan humanness'.

On the eve of South Africa's transitional period - in keynote addresses, speeches, book prefaces and introductions, and a monthly magazine column - Mphahlele advanced the argument that the main aims of the political transition ought to be the forging of a conducive environment for the reassertion of Afrikan humanness and Afrikan becoming. He observed that the use of the language of non-racialism and the hastiness surrounding 'the reconciliation project' constrained these objectives.

Mphahlele warned that constitutional negotiations between black and white elites would result in a transition from white domination to white hegemony. Today, as the 'unassimilated majority' assert their demands from the underside of society with growing force, the limits of that transition are evident to all. But, as Mphahlele anticipated, a decolonial project focused on whiteness, or repeating colonial ideas of Africa and blackness, cannot enable a genuine return to 'the source'.

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