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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 21(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1993

DOI

10.5070/F7213016728

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THE RETURN OF MAZISI KUNENE TO SOUTH AFRICA:
THE END OF AN INTELLECTUAL CHAPTER
IN OUR LITERARY HISTORY*

Ntongela Masilela

Mazisi, let me begin by expressing my profound gratitude and deep honor in being selected by you to be the keynote speaker on such a great occasion, your return home to South Africa tomorrow, July 26, 1993, a date which will go down in South African cultural history (note I say cultural history not political history) as having signaled the closing of the Exile Moment in our history. The closing of the political history of the Exile Moment in South African history is a complicated issue and complex process, which one can genuinely doubt whether it will ever be closable. That chapter, of our political history in exile, will be closed, if at all, by the development of genuine democracy in a New South Africa and by the unity of the African people, beyond the political divisions which are traumatizing all of us South Africans. I think the return of Ezekiel Mphahlele home in 1977, which caused so much consternation among many of our compatriots, after a self-imposed exile of twenty years, was an act which sought to indicate that fascism and apartheid in those hard times were going to be defeated much sooner than many of us thought possible. Your return tomorrow, after a forced political and cultural exile of thirty-four years, is an act which expresses the fact that apartheid has been defeated, though unfortunately as yet not dead, and as yet not unconditionally. Until its unconditional defeat, it is possible that apartheid could re-emerge or continue in a different form. Please, Mazisi, note the distinction I'm making between the self-imposed exile of Ezekiel Mphahlele and the forced political exile on your part, despite the fact that you left South Africa voluntarily in 1959 to pursue doctoral studies at the London School of Oriental and African Studies.

I think the causative factors of one's exile have had an enormous impact on the qualitative experiencing of the Exile Moment for each of us. All of us South Africans have experienced Exile differently, politically and culturally. In the decade I was living in Europe (in Poland and in West Germany), you came in 1987 to live in West Berlin for four months through a West German Foundation sponsorship. This gave us an occasion to renew our intellectual friendship, after not being able to see each other for approximately eight years. During our daily

*A Keynote Address given on Sunday July 25, 1993, at the Mazisi Kunene farewell luncheon and cultural presentations organized by the various Departments and Centers of the University of California at Los Angeles.

strolls in the streets of West Berlin for approximately three months we talked a lot about the historical meaning of our Exile Experience, among many other things. Then we did not know when or how our Exile Experience would end, but your return home tomorrow will in effect be putting that chapter in our cultural and intellectual history to a glorious end.

If at the beginning of this presentation I'm coupling your name together with that of Ezekiel Mphahlele, it is because his departure to Nigeria in 1957 was the opening line of this peculiar chapter in our cultural history. Your exile in 1959 was the beginning of a deluge that broke in 1960 following the Sharpeville Massacre. Thereafter Lewis Nkosi, the late Bloke Modisane, Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, and many others followed. Brilliant political leaders like Robert Resha, Duma Nokwe, Moses Mabhida, who are no longer with us, also took the high road of Exile. You became in 1962 the Chief Representative for the African National Congress in Europe and America, and became its Director of Finance in 1972. This was the beginning of a relationship fraught with many complications, complications which have continued up to the present. An objective and scholarly appraisal of the political complications of our Exile Experience will take place many decades later in the twenty-first century, when many if not all of the major figures like yourself would have by then disappeared from the scene. This is the reason I will not directly touch on political matters in this presentation. What I would like to indicate here, because of your greatness as a poet, one of the two or three great African poets alive today, is why your return to South Africa tomorrow is the last line of this peculiar chapter opened by Mphahlele in 1957.

Where does one begin in evaluating the prodigious dimensions of a colossus like Mazisi Kunene? Does one begin with the two great Zulu poets of the eighteenth century, Magolwane and Mshongweni, and end with the dazzling figure of Aimé Césaire in the late twentieth-century? Or does one begin with Nadine Gordimer, passing through Leopold Sedar Senghor, and ending with Ngugi wa Thiong'o? What this indicates is that the cultural space historically occupied by Mazisi Kunene is enormous and complex. Your two published epics, *Anthem of the Decades* and *Emperor Shaka the Great*, and the two anthologies, *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* and *Zulu Poems*, are an enormous edifice. Your as yet unpublished epics and anthologies are quite extensive. When all your works are eventually published in a democratic New South Africa, they will configure a new structure of our literary history.

I think the significance of your literary production is fully understandable when situated within the cultural coordinates of African literary and cultural history. In the 1950s, when you started seriously writing, two events of epoch-making proportions were taking place in

Africa: the emergence of African nationalism in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism, and the appearance of modern African national literatures in the European languages. Both of these phenomena were part of the process of modernization, the experiencing of modernity and the forging of modernism. In many ways both African nationalism, which was characterized not by singularity but by pluralism, and modern African national literatures in the European languages, were an attempt to establish the lines of continuity with our past which European colonialism and imperialism had broken. When one talks about African nationalism one recalls figures like Namdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Modibo Keita in Mali, Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia and many others. Three other forms of nationalism were of a qualitatively distinct nature: the African nationalism of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana which was affiliated and aligned with the Pan-Africanism of George Padmore, W.E.B. DuBois, and C.L.R. James among others; the African nationalism of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania which was in the process of constructing African socialism; and the African nationalism of Sekou Toure in Guinea which was allied with various forms of European socialist thought. Parallel with the emergence of African nationalism was the emergence of Arab nationalism in Africa, exemplified, for example, by figures as different from each other as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Ben Bella in Algeria and many others. The figures of modern African national literatures in the European languages are too many to name them all: from David Diop in Senegal through Kofi Awoonor in Ghana and Flora Nwapa in Gambia to Nuruddin Farrah in Somalia and Agostinho Neto in Angola. All of these writers were writing African literature in the European languages.

Your work, *Mazisi*, stood and stands against this tendency in African literary history, in that from the beginning it was written in an African language, namely in Zulu. This characteristic of your work, *Mazisi*, was profoundly unique, and this imprints one of its singular distinctions. If I do not mention Fagunwa in Nigeria who wrote in Yoruba, it is because he belongs to an earlier generation than yours, and his writings are not informed by a similar historical problematic as yours. In many ways, the historical problematic of your work is similar to that that informs modern African national literatures in the European languages, even if the responses are totally different from each other. The obvious question here, *Mazisi*, is: What is it that enabled you to hold the line of continuity by writing in an African language when most of the major African writers felt compelled to write in the European languages? I think what enabled Ngugi wa Thiong'o to bolt from the line of modern African writers writing in European languages to rejoin you practically alone in the line of modern African writers writing in the African languages was his discovery of, and encounter with, the African

Marxism of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral. African Marxism was the third historical force to have emerged in African intellectual history of the 1950s, 1960s, and the early 1970s. It is the African Marxism of Frantz Fanon that enabled Ngugi wa Thiong'o to see the untenability of the position that African literatures could ever be written in the European languages. Whereas the other African writers have taken for granted as to *what African literature is*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has repeatedly been asking himself this question. It is this point of illumination which makes Ngugi's critical works so fascinating: from *Homecoming* through *Decolonizing the Mind* to his recently published *Moving the Center*.

As to the reason why, Mazisi, you persisted and persist in writing your great poetry in an African language while Leopold Sedar Senghor in Senegal writes in French, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria continue to write in English, Mario de Andrade in Angola wrote in Portuguese, is that we in South Africa have a great tradition of literature written in our indigenous languages. There is practically no country in Africa, until perhaps very recently, that can compare with ours in the richness of the literature written in the African languages: we have Sotho literature, Zulu literature, Xhosa literature and so on. Albert S. Gerard's book, *Four African Literatures* (parts of which were lifted from your unfinished doctoral dissertation at the London School of Oriental and African Studies) is a proof of this. But here we come to a great paradox about our contemporary South African literature which would seem to disprove or actually does disprove the reason I'm postulating for your having always written in an African language. It is here that I would like to leave African continental cultural coordinates of your work and enter South African national cultural coordinates of it. Here is a shocker, Mazisi. Practically all the South African writers of your generation, with the exception of yourself, wrote or write in English: Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Alfred Hutchinson, Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza and I could continue naming others. Today all of these writers are known as part of the literary movement of the 1950s, the Sophiatown Renaissance, which was profoundly influenced by the American Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. I hope someone in the near future, hopefully a South African, will write a book on the fascinating friendship between Ezekiel Mphahlele and Langston Hughes. In fact, the Sophiatown Renaissance is incomprehensible without the acknowledged influence of the great Hughes. These South African writers are also known as "*Drum*" writers, since they were congregated around the magazine called *Drum*. The *Drum* writers, while in exile, were able to bring closely together, with Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark and others, modern South African national literature in English and modern Nigerian national literature in English, through their joint work on the

Transition magazine then based in Kampala and the *Black Orpheus* magazine based in Nigeria. I will touch on the relationship between black South Africa and black America towards the end of this presentation. If I do not mention other black South African writers who write or wrote in English, like James Mathews, Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, Richard Rive and others, it is because their situation is slightly different. Their mother tongue is Afrikaans, with the exception of Bessie Head. But we know that after the Soweto Uprising of 1976, there emerged Black Afrikaans, which has complicated further and enriched the structure of our literary history. This is another matter.

Here is a second shocker, Mazisi. The "*Staffrider*" writers of the 1970s, many of whom started writing previous to the Soweto Crisis, but who are also designated through the Soweto Uprising, have also written and continue to write in English. I'm thinking of Mongane Wally Serote, Njabulo Ndebele, Siphosiphiso Sepamla, Mzamane Mbulelo and many others. The seeming necessity to write in the English language is very strong. The persistence of the Sophiatown Renaissance writers and the "*Staffrider*" writers to write in English seem to disconfirm the theory that the extensiveness of the literature in the indigenous languages in our country has been a sustaining factor in your persistence in continuity of linguistic expression rather than veering toward discontinuity, a discontinuity which has been the prevalent mode in African literary history. My response here, Mazisi, please excuse the language, can only be "Damn the staying power of English, an imperial and colonial language." But there are other theories on the staying power of the English language coming from India. I'm thinking of the position of Nirad Chaudhuri, in his great book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, and the recently formulated position from the position of postcolonial literary theory by Aijaz Ahmad in *In Theory*. Both hold the position, in complexly different ways, that in the former British colonies the English language, through persistence and perseverance, has become an 'indigenous' language of those territories. It is a fascinating position. But I do not wish to pursue this matter further. Rather, I would like to move on to the central matter concerning us today, the phenomenon of Mazisi Kunene.

I would like to move on to the third level of the cultural coordinates within which your work is situated or can be viewed: the space of black international culture. I limit myself to only gesturing in this direction in the interest of time. Here, Mazisi, I'm thinking of your appraisal of the Negritude Movement. I have in mind your long introductory essay of 1969 to John Berger and Anna Bostock's translation of Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*. Your appraisal and evaluation of the Negritude Movement is warmer, respectful and more sober than the spleen-directed responses of Wole Soyinka and Ezekiel Mphahlele's to it. What really fascinated you,

Mazisi, I think, was the epic quality of Césaire's imagination. This is similar to the quality of your own imagination, which is epic. What was also memorable about your essay was your linking of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, and the nature of their significance to Africa. This question of the epic reminds me of something that happened during one of our West Berlin strolls of 1987. I will never forget this event. In the seventeen years I have known you, Mazisi, we met for the first time in 1975 here at UCLA when I was completing my doctoral studies and you were taking up the professorship from which you are retiring today, this was the first time I had ever heard you praise anyone without reservations of any kind. You kept on and on and on about the unsurpassable brilliance of the Upper Voltian (now Burkina Fasso, Ed.) great historian, Joseph Ki-Zerbo. You called him "an authentic African animal". This, is highest praise that can possibly come from you Mazisi. I remember this very vividly, because just a few months before we met, after a separation of eight years, I had read the German translation of his book, *Die Geschichte Schwarz-Afrikas*. It is an astonishing document. Unfortunately and tragically there is no English translation of the French original. I too hold Joseph Ki-Zerbo in very high esteem. I would like to quote these words, which I think, Mazisi, you will assent to, from Ki-Zerbo's "General Introduction" to the First Volume of *UNESCO General History of Africa*:

Another imperative requirement is that *African history must at last be seen from within*, not still measured by the yardstick of alien values. There cannot be an independent collective personality without an awareness of self and of the right to be different. Of course, the policy and practice of self-examination do not consist in artificially abolishing Africa's historical connections with the other continents of the Old and New Worlds. But these connections have to be analysed in terms of mutual exchanges and multilateral influences, in which something will be heard of Africa's contribution to the development of mankind [emphasis in the original].

Another writer whom you mentioned unreservedly was C.L.R. James. I think the book of the moment for you was *The Black Jacobins*. Your fascination for these two figures was not accidental. I think what fascinated you with these two great historians was the epic sweep of their historical imagination. When C.L.R. James, in his essay "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," which is an Appendix to the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*, praises Césaire for having united elements in modern thought which otherwise would have remained asunder. This praise could also be extended to your work. Insightfully analyzing *Return to My Native Land*, James

enumerates these three achievements of Césaire's poetry: "He has made a union of the African sphere of existence with existence in the Western world; the past of mankind and the future of mankind are historically and logically linked; no longer from external stimulus but from their own self-generated and independent being and motion will Africa and Africans move towards an integrated humanity." I think, Mazisi, this could also be said of your poetry. I will go no further to confirm this unity of poetical and historical perspectives between you and Césaire, than to read your poem, "Tribute to C.L.R. James: A great African and a great Freedom Fighter," which you wrote and published in *Emergences*, 1 a few months after James passed away four years ago:

Those who have nourished the earth
 Who have planted the dark forest on the mountain
 Command our children to celebrate and open the gates
 To acclaim the heroes who bore the fruit
 And feed all generations with the spider's vision
 When we have tasted the spring from the deep ocean
 We shall climb the high mountain of stars
 To praise the sacred snake in the center of the sun
 Forever and ever our generations come and go
 But the Ancestral stool is like the earth
 Life is suspended on a round boulder like time
 And from us emerges the eternal dream
 We are awoken from a violent sleep by the echoes of love
 Our clan is blessed with a thousand rivers
 Through a vast morning our sound is replayed again and again
 Our eyes open to praise him
 We have brought him back to our spring garden
 To walk proudly until our shadows and his merge with those of the
 earth.

In this poem of yours, Mazisi, you give recollection to the dialectical unity of the three corners of the African world, the simultaneity of tradition and modernity, the bridgeable gulf between history and nature in Africa and in the African diaspora, and the presence of the dead among the living. I think the mission Aimé Césaire defines for himself concerning black people in an interview with René Depestre, the brilliant Haitian poet, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, is similar to your poetic mission in Africa: "I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if we want to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are—that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we are black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that Negroes were

not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations." In this statement we encounter the analytical depth of Césaire's historical imagination.

I think your two published epics, *Anthem of the Decades* and *Emperor Shaka the Great*, and the two anthologies, *Zulu Poems* and *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*, are also characterized by the epic sweep of the historical imagination. The epic structure or quality is characteristic of your poetry, including also your very short poems. You too, Mazisi, through your poetry, belong to the company of these two great black historians (I should not forget to mention the great Cheikh Anta Diop who passed away in February 1986. What he said in an interview with Carlos Moore about Aimé Césaire, in the latest double-issue of *Présence Africaine* dedicated to Anta Diop, is absolutely breathtaking in its brilliance). Your epics, Mazisi, are a re-enactment of history, if not a creation of history, at least a recreation of history. They postulate African cosmology, the meaning of life, the nature of heroism, the bond between man and woman and other related themes. Your epics form a unity with other African epics, in that they establish the lines of continuity between the past and the present, as well as establishing the significance of the past for the present and the possible pathways to the future. Your epics within the South African context re-connect the lineages of tradition stretching from Mshongweni through Ntsikane to Mqhayi.

I think, Mazisi, when you were forced to go into exile, you were simultaneously forced to abdicate a literary space which up to the present has been dominated by modern South African national literature in the English language. The indigenous literatures, because they were severed from direct continuity with your work, were displaced from the center of South African literary experience. I think your going back home tomorrow will help to re-situate the indigenous literatures in their proper place in our cultural history. I think when Nadine Gordimer met you for the first time in France a few months ago and in a way paid her respects to you, it was an acknowledgement that her domination of South African literature, though deservedly because of her genius, was going to be over very soon. Your return to South Africa for the first time in thirty-four years will displace her into a relative position. I think we South Africans, for the last thirty-four years, whether we like it or not is irrelevant, have been living under the Literary Moment of Nadine Gordimer. Does your return to South Africa tomorrow, Mazisi, portend the beginning of the Literary Moment of Mazisi Kunene in our literary history? I leave you with this question, Mazisi. What kind of National Poet are you going to be or have been or will be, Mazisi kaMdabuli Kunene?

By a way of conclusion I would like to say this, Mazisi. For the last seventeen years you have resided here in Los Angeles in America.

And this has been your most productive period. You have written many epics and anthologies which are as yet to be published. When they are published, will we be able to trace the influence of the blues and spirituals, or other black expressive forms on them? In other words, Mazisi, what has been your creative response to the great forces of African-American culture? With this last question I would like to thank you for affording me this opportunity to pay this homage to you. But before leaving the podium I would like to read this poem, "The Bond," from *Zulu Poems*:

Gumede son of Ndaba, here I am.
I have come to present
This grinding stone of Masilela, my mother.
It is heavy, as though she weighted it with magic.
She left on it the gourd of her heart.
Do not forget it at Mpembeni house
Lest the vermin multiply on it.
Life may put a curse on us
Since we did not behave like her children.
If he be present who has a thousand ribs
Do not allow him to deceive you,
Promising a place for it on the fertile lands.
Hold it sacred knowing in it is our soul.

I sincerely hope, Mazisi, that the bond which has existed between us for two decades will continue forever.