

‘She’s There’: Strategies of Presenting in *Down Second Avenue* and in ‘Mrs Plum’

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Mphahlele (1989:59) explains the cryptic expression ‘She’s there’ in the following way:

when Africans say a person ‘is there’, they mean you cannot but feel she is alive; she allows you no room to forget she was born and is alive in flesh and spirit.

The demonstrative ‘there’ points to a place other than that in which the speaker is. In this expression a woman is located in or on that place. The manner/nature of her location is characterised by her agency and visibility apparent in her refusal to be put aside or effaced. From the vivid memories of childhood in *Down Second Avenue* and in the naive narrative voice of Karabo in ‘Mrs Plum’ Mphahlele registers the state of the woman’s presence as a historical being that lives out or actualizes her life within a given historical and political context. ‘She’s there’ is a response that consciously refuses the multiple marginalisations/ effacements that systematic practices of the patriarchal and apartheid systems seek to perpetuate.

The women that Mphahlele portrays in these stories are in communities which have just emerged from the rural settings into the urban territories of Pretoria and Johannesburg early this century. The migrations of people in search of economic and social opportunities necessitated the creation of new communities and new relationships that were different from those they left behind. It is within this process of formulation and change

that these women begin to identify and deploy strategies of survival, enabling them to continue to live or even thrive in spite of multiple added oppressions beyond the boundaries of their rural environment. Indeed, in *The African Image* Mphahlele (1974:28) affirms the importance of survival as a form of self-definition. He states that:

... out in the open labour market, you get to feel the muscle of the white power. You have to survive. If you are more sensitive you want to do more than survive. You want to create, to assert a presence.

Not only is the notion of community then with its implied homogeneity questioned but also the idea of tradition with established customs/culture is severely estranged. Homi Bhabha (1994:7) captures the situation I have been describing above in the following words:

The borderline work of culture demands encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates the sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause it renews the past refiguring it as contingent 'in-between' space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.

The women's agency and visibility manifest this sense of newness in the transference of cultural practices on to a new and different context. This sense of the new constitutes a break with the past, for it disrupts the seamless continuity by foregrounding resistance and interrogation. Mphahlele shows these women using varied mechanisms of cultural translations to construct sites of contestation. In this context the past (tradition/ culture) is revived not in its pristine state but altered by prevailing contemporary conditions. This altered state becomes a bridge between the past and the present. It is this mediating zone that these women have identified as a space for intervention and it is here that Mphahlele locates them. In fact, Carole Boyce Davies (1994:154) explains that location or positionality refers to one's 'physical or social space' as well as 'the oppositions embedded in each identity'. She further maintains that 'One's location may ... be a site of creativity ...

exploration, challenge, instability. Or it be a site of further repression' (Boyce Davies 1994:154).

In these narratives Mphahlele projects home or the domestic arena and community as physical and social spaces whose contradictions are explored and challenged by these women. In *The Politics of Home* George (1996:9) maintains that

Home is manifest of geographical, psychological and material levels Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. It is not a neutral place. It is community. Communities are not counter-constructions but only extensions of home

Mphahlele presents the women as using the home or domestic and community spaces as sites of creativity to establish their own agency. Their agency is reflected in their progressively empowering employment of transgressive strategies. Such strategies as the crossing and re-crossing of geographical and cultural borders, the position of initiation of a consultative process in a madam-servant relationship, the blurring of boundaries between the privacy of home and the public space of work are some of the many strategies that I want to examine in this paper.

An additional strategy is Mphahlele's assumption of a female voice in 'Mrs Plum' which enacts the immediacy and the subjective nature of first-hand experience at the same time that it subverts male agency which, in a rural traditional milieu, normally assumes ascendancy. In *Down Second Avenue* the voice is decidedly that of a boy whose observation of the women allows him to describe them only externally. His reliance on detailed physical description seems to focus on their physical concrete presence which is meant to reflect the psychological make up of the particular character he is describing.

In *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele portrays women deploying these strategies in ways that enunciate both their determination to inscribe their presence and the contradictions of their locations as they participate in the 'act of cultural translation' (Bhabha 1994:7). The paternal and maternal grandmothers occupy opposing or dissimilar spaces both geographically and psychologically in the young boy's mind. The paternal grandmother represents only the negative and uninspiring characteristics of the boy's

experience of Maupaneng village. His narrative captures the absence of agency in her cultural activities or lack of them as well as her unrelenting hostility when he says she sat there ‘... as big as fate, as forbidding as a mountain, stern as a mimosa tree’ (Mphahlele 1989:11). Rather than actively taking charge, she passively files her existence in a pre-determined traditional way. Her uncompromising meanness signals a determined refusal to accommodate change and the youthfulness (newness) of her grandchildren. The instability and disintegration of traditional life and culture in the village which Mphahlele records but whose devastating effect, which his young mind cannot fathom at the time, causes the grandmother to cling all the more to this fast-vanishing way of life. The Land Act of 1913 as well as the migratory labour system stripped the village of young able-bodied men and women. They left old men and women like Mphahlele’s grandmother bitter and disillusioned. She has been abandoned by her own children and grandchildren. Mphahlele then seems to project the village as a marginal space of passivity and emotional stunting. The geographical location of the village of Maupaneng is, for the paternal grandmother, a site of further repression which she is unable to challenge.

In contrast, Eseki’s maternal grandmother’s location in the urban geographical space is a site of active participation in the transformation of cultural categories and expectations as she transgresses traditionally assigned roles. Eseki’s grandmother assumes the patriarchal position of authority as head of a large family of thirteen members squeezed into a tiny two-roomed home. Her authority derives from the concrete circumstances of her position of seniority, her widowhood, her motherhood. It also emanates from the psychological and emotional significance of her children’s and her grandchildren’s dependence on her for a place of belonging that they can call home. Her centrality in the home is confirmed not only through the hierarchical sleeping arrangements through which she uses the only bedstead—‘an institution’—but also in the calculated decisions she takes about including homeless witchdoctors like Mathebula in her home space. This she does to protect herself against witches who might be lurking around.

However, the grandmother’s exercise of authority does not preclude patriarchal influence. Indeed, the confrontation ‘with newness’ of the urban situation makes her recall the past as an interrogation of the present as well

as an pointer to cultural transformation. She constantly mentions or repeats her husband's words, pearls of wisdom, as a method of interpreting and making palatable those elements of contemporary life that are difficult to comprehend fully. However, the paradox of her strategy is that the contemporary incidents are beyond the conceptualisation contained in the echo of those patriarchal words. In a sense, she unconsciously foregrounds the inadequacy of past patriarchal significations at the same time that she highlights her own hesitant agency in an active cultural transformation.

Grandmother was a religious woman I never knew my grandfather ... he must have exercised rigid discipline in his house in the true Lutheran fashion, because grandmother liked to quote some of his maxims (Mphahlele 1989:77f).

When she quotes some of his maxims and constantly refers to Titus 'sleeping in his grave' she uses them as images of stability in spite of their contradictory effect. When she decries the moral depravity of youth as exemplified by Boeta Lem it takes Old Rametse to point out that the world is not coming to an end. Rather it 'is the beginning of a new world' (Mphahlele 1989:91). Thus in this instance grandmother is located at a transitional zone in which her agency in the home as well as in the community is mediated through the repetition of past patriarchal maxims which become 'disjunct and displaced' (Bhabha 1994:4).

Yet her strategy of economic agency creates a space for intervention as she translates the cultural meaning of home and the domestic sphere. She interrogates idea of home as the 'private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gender, self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection' (George 1997:1). The border between the privacy of home and the openness of a public place becomes blurred as the grandmother and her daughters deploy their gender roles to interrogate their traditional location in the domestic space for economic survival. Mphahlele points to the urgency of survival in the following words:

Leave school my daughter and work ... stand up and do the white man's washing and sell beer. That's right—that is how a woman does it ... (Mphahlele 1989:41).

Home then becomes a place of economic production controlled by women, offering services within the community and across racial barriers. Both services washing and selling home-brewed beer make the home space alienating as they open the home to brutal police intrusion through beer raids and as Eseki encounters the hostility of the Afrikaners whose laundry he has to transport. The alienation in the home re-enacts the larger exile predicament experienced by blacks in the country as a whole. The home transforms into a sphere of matriarchal hierarchy where Eseki as the youngest male child assumes the traditional adult female role of running the home because the grandmother and aunt are bread winners, the uncles are too big and his brother and sister too small to do household chores. Structural changes within the home as well as between the home and the outside world bear witness to the agency of women's location in the home in an urban geographical space.

To the youthful Mphahlele both Aunt Dora and his mother present strength, but of a different kind. Whilst the mother's strength is characterised by quiet endurance, Aunt Dora's is marked by an irascible streak. His mother's agency is rooted in her children, more so than aunt Dora's and his grandmother's because of the bitter relationship between his parents. His mother's fierce assertion and challenging question to his father: 'They're mine. What do you do for them?' (Mphahlele 1989:26) signals her ascendancy as provider and authority over her husband and gives direction to her sense of survival. In contrast, Eseki's father needs 'skokiaan', the beer that grandmother condemns for its unwholesomeness, to bolster his own sagging self-image. Significantly, his father transposes his paternal grandmother's eroding harshness and absence of agency into the urban site.

On the other hand, Aunt Dora, unlike grandmother, is firmly located in the present. Mphahlele states that for her

... the past never seemed to hold any romantic memories, she never spoke about the future; she simply grappled with the present (Mphahlele 1989:107).

Her immediate, decisive 'reaction to' conditions around her determine her performance of the present. Her actions become examples of 'insurgent intervention' when she confronts both the school teacher and Abdool

who rule this country', on the other she wants Karabo's 'people who have been to school to choose those who must speak for them in parliament' (Mphahlele 1993:24).

Lilian Ngoyi is presented as a catalyst in Karabo's learning and growth. Her intervention sets up a dialogic exchange with Mrs Plum's words and activities. It is in the processing of the oppositions in these views that Karabo makes a decision on how to act. She measures her 'growing up' by the progress she achieves through Ngoyi's teaching. Her progress from being mystified and frightened by 'Madam' to understanding that 'this woman is like all other white women' (Mphahlele 1993:29) constitutes this 'growing up'. Yet the words 'Madam' and 'all white women' signal the contradictions of her location, as a servant, rather than her insight. The relations of power signified by the word 'madam' seem to be refuted in the phrase 'this woman' but reinvoked again in the generalisation of 'all white women'. If she cannot understand Mrs Plum because of her location as a domestic servant and as a black woman in spite of the close but circumscribed relationship with Mrs Plum how can she 'understand' all the other white women? Her 'understanding' then seems to refer to her active engagement with the class and race barriers of her location rather than indicating a complete insight into all white women.

Mrs Plum's invitation of Africans into her house in defiance of The Group Areas Act creates a space for contradictory ideological interpretation for Karabo. She is forthright about her view:

I was ashamed and I felt that a white person's house was not the place for me to look happy in front of other black people while the white man looked on (Mphahlele 1993:35).

She conceptualises 'her place' within a white household as a place of alienation, self-doubt and oppression. The presence of Africans disrupts her being resigned to her place as a servant in that although they belong to the same race as she, their higher class position inserts differences and prevents her from identifying with them. She admits that she does not like them because apart from speaking difficult English, 'they looked at [her] as if [she] were down right there whom they thought little of' (Mphahlele 1993:35). Their perceived superior attitude aligns them with Mrs Plum who

ironically is contemptuous of them. At the same time the presence of Mrs Plum prompts Karabo to display the understood oppressive power relations on her face which she feels ought to look unhappy. Thus she opts for dissembling as a strategy of dealing with the contradictory demands of her location. Her agency would not be compromised if she were at a place in which she belonged: 'At home or in my room I could serve them without a feeling of shame' (Mphahlele 1993:35).

Even though Karabo hides her feelings for the African doctor, the love triangle brings out views that Mrs Plum and Karabo seem to share but for different reasons. The irony of Mrs Plum's response to Kate's love for the African doctor is that she invokes the sentiments that are enshrined in the Immorality Act in her rhetorical questions 'It cannot be right is it?' (Mphahlele 1993:36). The irony of Kate's paternalism 'I want to help him', is that the doctor has already succeeded without her help. On the other hand Karabo is silenced by her location. However, her thoughts and condemnation of Kate as 'a thief and a fox that falls upon a flock of sheep at night' (Mphahlele 1993:36) puts both her and the doctor at the level of victims. Karabo sees Kate as the hostile intruder into a territory that is reserved for Africans. Her expression of strangeness, 'We have never seen this happen before where I come from' (Mphahlele 1993:36) hides a more intense emotion. Karabo's presencing here might not be 'an insurgent act of creativity' in that she plays out the status quo, but it is a process of learning to cope in a new situation.

The prison episode illustrates the working out of two divergent ideological perspectives. Mrs Plum's hosing of policemen and going to prison for it as an act of significant political protest is assessed by Karabo's more confident awareness of the nature of their relationship:

[Madam] looked very sad when she came out. I thought of what Lilian Ngoyi often said to us: You must be ready to go to jail for the things you believe are true and for which you are taken by the police, what did Mrs Plum really believe about me, Chimane, Dick and all the other black people? I asked myself (Mphahlele 1993:41).

Through the dialogue with herself Karabo dramatizes her attempts to reconcile Ngoyi's political lessons with Mrs Plum's behaviour and remains

unsure of her motives. Karabo's view seems to be that in the absence of equality based on human dignity there will always be suspicion. It is this doubt that takes away the impact of Mrs Plum's imprisonment. Indeed Karabo sees her shame for having been in prison as a litmus test of her real commitment to the African people African people: 'she was ashamed to have been there. Not like our black people who are always being put in jail and only look at it as the white man's evil game' (Mphahlele 1993:50).

Repudiation as Karabo's strategy of self-empowerment reaches its culmination when Mrs Plum dismisses Dick for suspecting him of killing her missing dogs. Karabo starts this process when she wants to read a 'Sunday paper that spoke about my people' (Mphahlele 1993:30) and when she decides 'she was going to buy other kinds [of cosmetics]' (Mphahlele 1993:44). Her feeling of repulsion signals her rejection of what she sees as Mrs Plum's attempts to colonize her. Thus Mrs Plum's question 'Do you think Dick is a boy we can trust?' (Mphahlele 1993:50) evokes a rejection from Karabo. She refuses to be included in the pronoun 'we' with its implication of convergence of views. The irony is Mrs Plum's unawareness of Karabo's cynical view of their relationship.

The masturbation episode participates in the unfolding of the process of repudiation. It is Mphahlele's extremely provocative image of alienation and repulsion engendered by the apartheid system. Karabo's observation that 'Mrs Plum loved dogs and Africans' emphasises the attention and care she lavishes on her two dogs. In subsequent references to them Karabo privileges the African point of view. She achieves this through the structure of her narration in which she gives primacy to the servant's perspectives. She inverts the prioritizing of Mrs Plum's dogs by focussing the first three parts of her narration on the problematics of relationship among people located on this site of multiple intersections. The casual, unapologetic tone of her statement:

When I began to tell my story I thought I was going to tell you mostly about Mrs Plum's dogs. But I have been talking about people (Mphahlele 1993:31),

foregrounds her essential interest in people.

In addition Karabo consistently highlights the servants' assessment

which is based on their own cultural views that centre the value of human beings. Thus Chimane criticises her employer for valuing a cat more than her mother-in-law and Dick sees the importance of animals in the use they are put to rather than in their indulged existence. Within the South African political system of repression Karabo and her peers regard the elevation of animals above human beings as a further repudiation of the bond of humanity between the white and the black people at a more private and personal level. Chimane's words:

These white people can do things that make the gods angry. More godless people I have not seen (Mphahlele 1993:47).

express shock at the envisaged dog cemetery. Her judgement is sanctioned by her indigenous belief system that centres on human beings. It is also this judgement, prompted by Dick's dismissal that makes Karabo terminate her service. Her resignation, in the following words: 'I told her I was leaving for Phokeng and was not coming back to her' (Mphahlele 1993:53) signal her own repudiation and agency as 'an insurgent act' of political transformation on a personal level. Mindful of the master-servant dialectic that Lilian Ngoyi affirms when she says: 'they cannot breathe or live without the work of your hands' (Mphahlele 1993:28), Karabo uses her location as a site of self-empowerment. Her resignation is not capitulation rather it is the creation of a space for self-actualisation, another step in her critical exploration of the white urban territory. She knows now 'how far she would go with others' (Mphahlele 1993:20).

Her temporary return or relocation to Phokeng, the home territory, creates a dynamic interface between the urban and the rural territory. Karabo occupies the rural space as a site of replenishment and restoration. She makes the following statement:

I wanted her to say to say she was sorry to have sent me away, I did not know how to make her say it because I know white people find it too much for them to say Sorry to a black person. As she was not saying it , I thought of two things to make it hard for her to get me and may be even lose me in the end (Mphahlele 1993:55).

She puts herself in the position of control. The restoration is not so much for

her as it is for Mrs Plum. The latter's dignity as a human being can be restored only if she acknowledges the dignity of other human beings. In the absence of a clear apology Karabo sets up a process of 'negotiation' in which Mrs Plum is forced to consult her on the terms of her employment. Mrs Plum's conciliatory words are an attempt to recognise and acknowledge Karabo's presence as a person in her own right. When they leave together to return to Johannesburg Karabo observes that Mrs Plum

looked kinder than I have ever known her. And me, I felt sure, more than I had ever done (Mphahlele 1993:55).

Karabo's self-confidence remains undisturbed by her doubt of Mrs Plum's real transformation. On the contrary, the fact that Mrs Plum comes to Phokeng to request her to return is salutary.

My selection of some of the women that Mphahlele represents focussed on their developing dynamism and determination in articulating their presence within communities in transition. According to Derrida (1998:396f) 'the category of subject is not and never has been conceivable without reference to presence'. Thus, in portraying women as active participants in the transformation of their emerging societies Mphahlele privileges their subjecthood and their presence.

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