Steve Bantu Biko: A Thought Leader Gone Far Too Soon

By Philden Ndlela
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- Gone far too soon
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Both Biko and Dr King foresaw their own death. The type of work they did spoke truth to power. In a speech entitled, "I See The Promised Land" Dr King declared:

And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight, I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord (1992:203).

And in an essay entitled, "On Death" Biko asserted:

You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway... So if you overcome the personal fear for death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know then you are on the way (1978:152).

You can blow out a candle But you can't blow out a fire

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I. Introduction

This essay seeks to centre Biko’s immense contribution to the liberation struggle in a post-apartheid society that has become afflicted with amnesia and selective memory; a post-liberation society that remains trapped in sectional politics; a society that conveniently valorises and recognises ruling elite former political activists. Such brazen self- serving and self – congratulatory political machinations will not enrich and strengthen the country’s crucial social cohesion project. In an article titled, "Whither the Black Consciousness Movement? An Assessment" South Africa’s first democratically –elected President, Nelson Mandela asserts:

There are critics in all sections of the liberation movement who refuse to acknowledge the achievements of others.

They seem to believe that such acknowledgement will be a weakness on their part and a lack of confidence in their own organisations (2001:21).

Triumphalism? Diffidence? Paranoia? Depravity? Questions, and more questions. In an article entitled, “How have we learnt liberty?” former Black Consciousness activist Dr Mamphela Ramphele who along with Biko and other colleagues built a health clinic at Zinyoka, a village outside his home town Ginsberg, cautions against the ruling elite’s propensity to

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conveniently make us forget who we are. To buttress her argument, she invokes French thought leader, Milan Kundera who asserted:

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long, that nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was... The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting... The worst thing is not that the world is unfree, but that people have unlearnt their liberty (City Press, September 8, 2019).

Still on the question of the “invention of new history” and “the struggle of memory against forgetting” one wonders how many people in South Africa know that Biko, Mamphele and other Black Consciousness activists built a clinic in a village outside King William’s Town? Does the post-apartheid government support this clinic by way of resources? Is Biko’s contribution in the struggle for liberation part of our school curriculum? Or, in the words of Nelson Mandela, “such acknowledgement will be a sign of weakness”. Weakness? In what sense? The struggle to free South Africa was multi-pronged and it was mounted from different fronts.

Biko was the exemplar of the sort of leadership defined by Mbulelo Mzamane as “accommodating, inclusive and life-giving”. The Black Consciousness philosophy he advocated rejected apartheid culture which Mzamane defines as “intolerant, exclusive, incestuous and therefore, moribund (2005: iv). The Zinyoka health clinic outside King William’s Town – a Biko-Ramphele initiative was as liberating as it was humanising. It provided a template to the rural development paradigm which is at the centre of the post-apartheid government’s reconstruction agenda. The construction of this clinic also gave substance and meaning to the 1970s South African Students’ Organisation (SASO) Slogan, “Black Man you are on your own”. This initiative speaks to Biko’s vision, courage, wisdom and thought leadership. After all, courage and wisdom are not conflicting values.

In his magnum opus, “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity”, he asserts that the movement he led was counter-hegemonic in orientation and sought to be therapeutic and affirmative to the oppressed. After the relative political hiatus that was occasioned by the banning of major liberation movements in South Africa, such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Unity Movement in South Africa, the oppressed were diffident and almost rudderless whilst the apartheid government became emboldened and intensified its brutality and repression. Some sections of the oppressed were cowed by the state’s relentless repression, and they acquiesced. The apartheid state hatched several schemes to intimidate them, to chain and to control their bodies and minds. Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement sought to reclaim the oppressed’s dignity, to reaffirm their worth and humanity and to unchain their minds which were captured by the repressive state and its ruthless, dehumanizing machinery. Talking of the pivotal and central role of the oppressed’s mind to the oppressor’s grand design, Biko writes as follows in his landmark essay:

At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed (1978:92).

Dissecting the centrality of the oppressed’s mind in the Black Consciousness liberation paradigm, Biko asserts in his landmark essay:

Black Consciousness is the attitude of mind and a way of life, the most positive call to emanate from the black world for a long time. Its essence is the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brother around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin-and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black (1978:75).

Giving context to the genesis of the Black Consciousness philosophy in South Africa he asserts:

In other words, the “Black Consciousness” approach would be irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society. It is relevant here because we believe an anomalous situation is a deliberate creation of man (1978:89).

Shedding more light on the appropriateness and relevance of the Black Consciousness paradigm in South Africa, he asserts:

The overall analysis therefore, based on the Hegelian Theory of dialectic materialism, is as follows. That since the thesis is white racism there can be one valid antithesis i.e. a solid black unity to counterbalance the scale (1978:51).

The Black Consciousness Movement used blackness as a prism to rally, to conscientise, and to unite the oppressed to the cause of freedom. The apartheid government used the people’s colour, their blackness to exclude and to deprive them of their fair share in the country’s resources. So, the Biko-led Black Consciousness Movement was counter-hegemonic and subversive in intent. Biko was not a separatist. He
recognised and appreciated the importance of strategic alliances that resonated with his movement’s value-system.

But he was wary of the disposition and modus operandi of white liberals in the struggle for the liberation of the minds and bodies of the disfranchised black majority. He reasoned:

For the liberals, the thesis is apartheid, the anti-thesis is non-racialism, but the synthesis is very feebly defined. They want to tell blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution. The concept of integration, whose virtues are often extolled in white liberal circles, is full of unquestioned assumptions that embrace white values. It is an integration in which the black man will have to prove himself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate and assumption, and in which the poor will grow poorer and the rich richer in a country where the poor have always been black (1978:91).

Biko’s predecessor, the father of Pan Africanism in South Africa, the late Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was also wary and critical of the stance of white liberals in South Africa, the late Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was also wary and critical of the stance of white liberals in the South African racial nightmare. In a landmark speech he delivered as a twenty-three year (23) old student at Fort Hare in 1949, he proclaimed:

Every time our people have shown signs of uniting against oppression, their “friends” have come along and broken that unity. In the very earliest days it was the missionary. Because 1940 and 1946 it has been the professional liberal (1949:4).

The Biko-led Black Consciousness Movement eschewed making blacks complicitous in their own oppression. The advocates of the Black Consciousness philosophy know of apartheid’s depersonalising and depersonalising thrust. Resonating with their thinking is Frantz Fanon’s dissection of colonialism, apartheid’s twin monster. He defines its modus operandi in the following terms:

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?” (1963: 250).

Critiquing the apartheid state’s segregated system of education and its systematic erosion and denigration of black culture and family values, Biko writes:

Children were taught, under the pretext of hygiene, good manners and other such vague concepts, to despise their mode of upbringing at home and to question the values and customs of their society. The result was the expected one—the children and parents saw differently and the former lost respect for the latter. Now in African society it is a cardinal sin for a child to lose respect for his parent. Yet how can one prevent the loss of respect between child and parent when the child is taught by his know-all white tutors to disregard his family teachings? Who can resist losing respect for his tradition when in school his whole cultural background is summed up in one word-barbarism? (1978:94).

But the bastardisation of black culture does not seem to have been a uniquely South African phenomenon – it seems to have been a global scourge. Lamenting the bastardisation and even inferiorisation of black culture and self-denigration within the African-American middle-class, poet laureate Langston Hughes asserts:

The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often says “Don’t be like niggers” when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, “Look how well a white man does things”.

And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of “I want to be white” runs through their minds. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns (1994:91).

Steve Biko was detained near GRAHAMSTOWN in the Eastern Cape on August 18, 1977. On August 19, he was handed into the custody of the Security Police in Port Elizabeth. He was denied exercise and kept naked in a police cell for eighteen days. Interrogation began on September 6, and by September 7, he had suffered a brain injury which was the result of three blows to the head according to the findings of a neurological pathologist. He was transported naked on the floor of a police van to Pretoria, where he died on September 12, 1977. Delivering a sermon entitled, “Oh God, How Long Can We Go On?” at Biko’s funeral, this is how Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu defined Biko:

God called him to be the Founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, against which we have had tirades and fulminations. It is a movement by which God, through Steve, sought to awaken in the black person a sense of his intrinsic value and worth as a child of God, not needing to apologize for his existential condition as a black person, calling on blacks to glorify and praise God that he had created them black. Steve, with his brilliant mind that always saw to the heart of things, realized that until blacks asserted their humanity and their personhood, there
was not the remotest chance for reconciliation in South Africa (1977:19).

In the midst of apartheid rule’s egregious, inhumane and depersonalizing laws, the country’s oppressed black majority needed a counter-hegemonic, humanizing and therapeutic philosophy of this magnitude. The psychological damage visited on the country’s oppressed was multi-pronged and soul – eroding. It caused some of them to seek validation by gravitating towards whiteness in a country whose whites saw them as “invisible”.

What kind of leader was Biko? In an essay entitled, “The Legacy of Steve Biko”, his long-time friend Barney Pityana asserts:

Biko was no saint. He would not wish to be considered as set apart from the people. If hero he was, then it was not by his ambition but by force of circumstance whose only virtue was that he willed the people to stand up and to bring an end to the rule of the oppressor (1991:254).

In a post-apartheid South Africa bedevilled by a paucity and deficit of value-based and selfless leadership that uses its struggle credentials for self-enrichment, one wonders how Biko would have reacted. In a post-apartheid South Africa ensnared by morbid symptoms and startling revelations of state capture and kleptocracy, Biko must be turning in his grave at this alarming descent and at a predatory and selfish leadership that has jettisoned morality and respect for those who elected them into office.

Biko blazed his own trail. He was black and proud without apology. As a leader, he was neither vain, depraved nor narcissistic. His famous words, “and your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing” have resonance. Prophetic. Prescient. Gone far too soon.

Phil Ndlela is Associate Professor in English Literature. A former Fulbright scholar, he holds a PhD from the University of Massachusetts in the US.

An itinerant scholar, he has held lecturing positions at the following universities: the University of Fort Hare; the Nelson Mandela University (NMU); the University of Zululand and North West University—his current employer. He has presented his research at international fora, and Lovedale Press published his collection of essays, Orality, Literacy and the Discourse of Liberation in 2010. It was launched at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival (Word Fest) in July 2010.

a) He has served in the following Research Forums
• The National Association of African-American Studies and Affiliates (NAAASA)
• He has also served as External Examiner for the following institutions;
• The University of South Africa (UNISA)’s Department of English Studies.
• The University of Fort Hare
• The University of Limpopo

During the Spring 2017 Semester, he was offered the Prestigious Andrew W Mellon Foundation Scholarship as a Visiting Professor of Humanities by CLAFLIN University in South Carolina, US. Apart from lecturing Black writing in South Africa, he also delivered three public lectures - one of which was titled: “Hallmarks of Ascent: The Nelson Mandela Presidency and Beyond”.

On 26 March 2018, he delivered a paper entitled, “Firing With The Pen”: Cantering The Intellectual Legacy Of Phyllis Ntantalja-Jordan. The Seminar was held at the University of Fort Hare’s Centenary Art Gallery, hosted by the National Heritage and Cultural Studies (NAHECS).

b) His research areas are as follows
• African-American Literature
• Black South African Writing
• Cultural Studies
• Postcoloniality

On March 6th, 2019, he was a Respondent to Dr Mandla Langa’s Memorial Lecture in honour of departed Poet Laureate, Professor Willie Keorapetse Kgositsile. at North West University, Mafikeng Campus.

On 28 March 2019 he delivered a Memorial Lecture on the late Professor Mbulelo Mzamane, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare. My keynote address was entitled, “He brightened the corner”: Mbulelo Mzamane, exemplar of the African Literary Tradition and Independent Thought.