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***Cultural identity and the transnation in Mokae and Ndlela's stories.***

**Abstract I:** Following the emergence of migrant communities and diasporic cultures, it has become increasingly difficult to think about culture and cultural identity as limited to the boundaries of the nation state. In fact some cultural theorists have long predicted the death of the nation state. This paper seeks to deconstruct the concept of the nation state as a signifier of cultural identity- a concept which was constructed during and in the aftermath of political decolonisation in the postcolonial world in general and post-apartheid South Africa in particular. It thus advocates freedom from national borders and the formation of transnations and transcultures. The study uses insights from Phil Ndlela and Gomolemo Mokae's stories published in the anthology *At the rendezvous of victory and other stories* (1999); stories that capture the "immigrant problem" and the politics of cultural identity in post apartheid South Africa.

**Abstract II:** L'emergere di comunità e culture migranti mette in crisi il modello essenzialista della identità culturale vista come limitata e definita dai confini degli stati nazionali. Questo articolo si pone come obiettivo di discutere e decostruire l'utopia essenzialista delle identità nazionali costituite dopo la fine della colonizzazione nel mondo post-coloniale in genere e in modo particolare nel Sud Africa del post-apartheid. Si auspica che il concetto di identità venga liberato dalla nozione di confine nazionale per dare spazio a transnazioni e transculture. Lo studio si basa sulle storie di Ndela e Mokae che, pubblicate nell'antologia *At the rendezvous of victory and other stories* (1999), hanno icasticamente presentato il "problema dell'immigrato" nel Sud Africa del post-apartheid e nel resto del mondo post-coloniale.

This paper seeks to investigate the representation of cultural identity in the stories of two South African writers, Gomolemo Mokae and Phil Ndlela. The short narratives, "Milk and honey galore, honey!" and "A question of identity" respectively appear in an anthology entitled *At the rendezvous of victory and Other stories* compiled by Andries Walter Oliphant (1999). Both narratives celebrate and interrogate the dawn of South African independence and the postcolonial cultural challenges facing post-apartheid South African society (Oliphant 1999: 7). In this paper, I intend to challenge and deconstruct 'essentialised' national identities constructed during and in the aftermath of national liberation in the postcolonial world in general and post-apartheid South Africa in particular.

Gomolemo Mokae's story projects post-apartheid South African society as multicultural. The most pertinent question raised in this story is how post-apartheid South Africa as a microcosm of a cosmopolitan community negotiates and translates the possibilities of co-existing with aliens or foreigners that have invaded its national borders. Is it possible, given the multiple cultural groups residing in South Africa today, to conceive cultural identity as confined within specific national boundaries? Who is the genuine South African citizen? Is it someone born within the confines of South Africa's national borders, whose ancestors lived within the present geographical limits or one who owns an identity document that specifies South Africa as his/her country of birth? Using national identity as a criterion of categorizing people and ascribing identity is problematic in present day South Africa; massive movements of people from its neighboring countries, went to work on the Rand in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, more recently, the influx of migrants from politically troubled African countries continues to arrive. In Mokae's story Themba Mlotshwa, the protagonist, is a foreigner who has all along pretended to be a South African citizen, and has been denigrating and stereotyping other immigrants.

He is originally from Lesotho, has lived in South Africa for seven years and has never gone back to his home country (not even temporarily) where he left a wife and seven children. His "real" Sotho name is Tsepo Moloto but when he

crosses the South African border, he adopts a new name, Themba Mlotshwa. The name strategically aligns him with the Zulu nation of South Africa and thus gives him a sense of security in his newly-found home. However, the abandoned wife and children remind us of the consequences of migration on the family unit. In this case, while migration has liberated the individual (Themba), it has divided the family. From the beginning of the story, Themba disguises as a South African citizen. It is only after the arrival of his wife that his past is exposed. Themba's dissolution of his Sotho identity encapsulates the predicament of the diasporic citizen whose new transnational cultural identity is both "melancholic and convivial" (Ashcroft 2009: 16). Living in a foreign land is melancholic in the sense that it exposes him to an alien culture that is hostile and exclusive, but it is also convivial in that it opens up new life opportunities for him.

The name "Themba" which literally means "hope" holds the promise of happiness in the diasporic space. This happiness is, however, disrupted and perhaps transformed into melancholy by the arrival of police Chief Krappies Van Wyk accompanied by Themba's long abandoned wife. Themba is thus entrapped in a shifty cultural space akin to Homi Bhabha (1994)'s interstitial space, a space that promises happiness and melancholy, gain and loss. As Bhabha (1994: 5) puts it, "the interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy". The interstitial passage suggested by Bhabha is evident in the thin line of demarcation between the two names "Tsepo Moloto" and "Themba Mlotshwa". This subtle name-change dramatizes the hybrid nature of identity in the transnation and makes it difficult for us to conceptualize it in Manichean terms. Themba maintains his initials "T M" initials even after crossing the national border. This implies that cultures may overlap and intermingle, but one's cultural roots are never completely lost. Paul Gilroy (in Georgiou and Silverstone, 2007: 30) argues that "diasporic identity is about roots as much as it is about routes in the diasporic journey". Cultural identity draws from the past (roots) and the present (routes) to move into the future. In the new global order, which Appadurai (in Croucher 2009) characterized as post-

national, the nation is not the sole signifier of identity because it is intricately connected to other nations in a global network. Bill Ashcroft defines the transnation as “a complex of mobility and multiplicity that supersedes both ‘nation’ and ‘state’.” (2009: 14). Applied to Themba’s case, cultural identity is not only located in his past (Tsepo Moloto) but also in his present (Themba Mlotshwa).

Mokae’s story suggests that national boundaries can be successfully transcended and new “transnational” identities can be formulated just as Themba/Tsepo has done. Considering the way Themba hates immigrants, it is possible that he tries to distance himself from his own past. Apart from having acquired a new name, Themba has strategically imbibed South African cultural values and a kind of strategic ‘patriotism.’ To consolidate his own precarious position, he calls other illegal immigrants “unpatriotic Africans who left their independent countries” only to deprive South African citizens of job opportunities.

South Africa is the “milk and honey” of Mokae’s story title. It reminds us of Canaan, the biblical Land of promise. Ibrahim Patel’s restaurant, where people from different parts of the continent converge and dine together, epitomizes the transnation in that it brings together a variety of cultural formations and symbolizes the ideal Canaan of Africa. Being an Indian business man, Patel is perhaps a neutral intermediary of the heterogeneous African tastes (symbolic of cultural differences) that constitute cultural and a political rendezvous of people from a variety of cultures. The cultural composition of the restaurant and the wide range of cultural tastes it satisfies underscore the impossibility of a cultural politics that views the nation as “the only or the primary source of cultural and political belonging” (Croucher 2009: 77). In other words, South Africa is no longer a nation in the narrow sense of a group of people who share the same history, culture, traditions etc. It is a flexible entity, negotiating the imperatives of what Appadurai characterized as the post-national global order which is “more fluid, more ad hoc, more provisional, less coherent, less organized and simply less

implicated in the comparative advantages of the nation state" (Croucher 2009: 82).

The fact that the restaurant is owned and managed by Ibrahim Patel (an Indian) implies the "transnationality" of South Africa's cultural economy. In spite of his foreign status, Ibrahim Patel has taken the responsibility of serving an African diet. The "OAU", Ibrahim Patel's restaurant, reminds us of the Organization of African Unity (now AU), a political body that sought to bring together culturally diverse African countries. This restaurant is thus symbolic of the vast multiculturalism of the African continent. One of the characters in the story, the Nigerian Chief Onigbinde, points out that African cultures interact harmoniously in spite of many differences; for example, South Africans use Nigerian regalia for their traditional ceremonies. It is for this cultural intermixing that different cultural groups in Africa remain inextricably indebted to one another.

While Themba tends to essentialise identity by limiting the taxonomy of "genuine South African" to the borders of nationality, Chief Onigbinde, the Nigerian of Mokae's story, points out that Africans are brothers, hence the boundaries of the nation state are not rigid; they are porous, flexible and can always be transcended. The crux of the argument is that Africans have shared a lot of cultural values over the centuries and, therefore, there are more similarities than differences between them. Africa's cultural diversity is reflected in cultural symbols, the "kaleidoscope of traditional dress" and the "languages [that are] as varied as the diners' different tastes in dishes" (Mokae 1999: 208).

The major trope of Mokae's narrative is that people are usually divided on emotional grounds (for example, xenophobia in the case of South Africa) rather than on the basis of concrete cultural differences. Themba's advocacy for the repatriation of foreigners is thus more emotional than rational because extremely contradictory. When the Nigerian chief speaks about the traditional dress that South Africans adopted from Nigeria, we are told that Themba "shrivel[ed] in his kaftan" and wished "he had his traditional weapon on him" so he could "wipe the smirks off the faces of the unwelcome interlopers" (Mokae

1999: 211). Themba's intense phobia is founded on traditional stereotypes and generational falsehoods inculcated in his imagined national identity. The immigrants from different countries are portrayed in a stereotypical cast. Nigerians are represented as drug lords, potential cheats and consumerists as implied in the chief's "regal, flowering robes" and the "gold tooth" (Mokae 1999: 207). These stereotypes confine Themba to a binary world that classifies everyone from Nigeria as a potential drug lord. Although this position is adopted as a survival strategy, it "becomes the basis of exclusion through the rhetoric of verisimilitude and authenticity that asserts what is 'real' and 'true.'" (Childs & Williams 1997: 159). This mindset, which is a narrow version of what Spivak (1990) calls strategic essentialism (picking up the universal that will give you the power to fight the other side), explains his inclination to engage in xenophobic violence at the slightest opportunity.

Another character of the book, Dr. Looksmart Banda, a Malawian herbalist is projected as a counterfeit doctor who speaks "broken English" perhaps because he is uneducated. He is dark in complexion with "sparkling white teeth" (Mokae 1999: 209). This description is crafted with the intention of excluding him from the South African nation because such an appearance cannot be South African. However, the Malawian correctly points out that South Africa and Malawi are culturally intertwined because of the traditional medical help that South Africans get from Malawian practitioners. In that sense, there is actually a symbiotic relationship between the two countries hence the need for cultural integration rather than "nationalistic" isolation.

While Gomolemo Mokae acknowledges the diverse cultural formations within the South African transnation and sees the possibility of multicultural integration, Phil Ndlela (1999) chooses to present culture, through the narrator of his story, as something that can be defended and kept in a state of purity. His narrative interrogates "the question of identity" from a single, narratorial perspective. The title, "A question of identity" is overtly loud, posturing as the writer's reading of his own story.

The narrator of Ndlela's story is locked up in an essentialised cultural apartment where being South African assumes a particular ethnocentric meaning. Unfortunately, he expects all South Africans, even those in the diaspora (America) to partner him in that static cultural apartment. Ndlela's story is about a young South African man who has just arrived in New York for his studies at a Graduate school. Having failed to negotiate what he perceives as a wide cultural gap between his Xhosa culture and American culture, he adopts an essentialist attitude that castigates everything that differs from his cultural worldview. He expects fellow Africans in America, his "brothers and sisters" (Ndlela 1999: 211) as he puts it, to adhere to "African culture". What he does not realize, of course, is that the Africans he refers to as his 'brothers and sisters' have cultures that are obviously different from his because Africa, as we have seen in Gomolemo Mokae's story, is a heterogeneous continent. Africans have different life experiences that shape their cultures. A common ground can only be reached through negotiation rather than prescription.

America, as a microcosm of the diasporic space like post-apartheid South Africa, is indeed "complex and confusing" (Ndlela 1999: 212) for the narrator because he is impervious to transcultural influences. He views all Africans stereotypically, as a monolithic mass, thus revealing his essentialist view of culture. The narrator is indeed "naïve and dumb" (Ndlela 1999: 212) because he has isolated himself only to blame everyone and everything around him. His predicament is that he fails to transcend the boundaries of his "national culture": he has crossed borders physically but he is still psychologically bound to a static, perhaps "tribal" world.

The narrator has a tendency, like Themba, to stereotype those that do not ascribe to his idea of what it means to be African. Standing aloof on a cultural pedestal like Chinua Achebe's Odili in *A Man of the People* (1989, 1966), he goes on to launch a tirade against Professor Makapela, a successful South African intellectual whom he portrays as culturally lost. His unsubstantiated allegations against Professor Makapela reverberate back to him, exposing his purism and self righteousness. He characterizes Professor Makapela as

“uprooted and assimilated” (Ndlela 1999: 216) yet he too is culturally dislocated: for all his claims to cultural authenticity, he only has his command of the Xhosa language to show for it.

His cultural disposition, particularly his unmistakable Judeo-Christian sensibility, shows that he is similarly acculturated; his own people keep feeding him Christian tracts (Psalms) as if there is nothing in his own culture to sustain him in America. South African traditional beer may not be primitive as Professor Makapela puts it, but the fact that it is South African does not necessarily make it healthy, but American beer is not better either, healthwise. That the “standard of South African education is disgustingly low” (Ndlela 1999: 217) as Professor Makapela puts it, may be a mere historical fact in some cases, given the ravages that apartheid brought about in Bantu Education: saying that, does not necessarily mean one is not South African enough.

The narrator's essentialised view of culture and sense of patriotism is narrow and exclusive. While he seeks to demonize Professor Makapela, like Themba who denigrates fellow immigrants, the narrator does not realize that he is no different. When he looks at Professor Makapela through the mirror of his judgmental eyes, what he sees is actually his own image. He calls Professor Makapela a “balding bastard” and “country bumpkin” (Ndlela 1999: 216). Yet those very labels are equally appropriate for him. Professor Makapela may be a “country bumpkin” because he has forsaken the culture of his people, but then the narrator is equally so because he refuses to adjust to a new cultural setting.

Subscribing to a culture does not mean singing the anthem of that culture all the time, though knowing the anthem may be necessary in some instances. Professor Makapela used to be proud of South Africa, but he is not anymore because of the high crime rates in the country. While the book he has written on South Africa reflects an outsider's perspective, writing such a book does not render him “un-South African” either. Edward Said (in Ashcroft, 2009:19) represents exile as an elevated position “from which truth can be spoken to power”. This is perhaps the advantage that Professor Makapela utilizes in writing a book that tackles “head on” the corruption and violence in post-apartheid

South Africa. The fact that Professor Makapela has portraits of Ronald Reagan and George Bush in his house instead of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo should not make the narrator question "is this man a genuine black South African or an impostor?" (Ndlela 1999: 216). What is a genuine black South African in the first place - that is the question.

Although the narrator seeks to project the Professor as culturally rootless, it is apparent that his perception of culture is myopic. Like Themba in Mokae's story, he sees culture as something that can be preserved in a state of purity. He does not seem to appreciate the fact that Professor Makapela has learnt and lived in America for so long that he cannot be expected to remain untouched by cultural contact. His narrow view of culture is evident when he addresses Professor Makapela's children, Neo and Thabisa, in Xhosa: when they respond in English, he labels them as culturally lost. The two girls encapsulate the complexity of diasporic identity. While Neo embodies the "new" values of American society as her name implies, Thabisa (the person who brings happiness), symbolizes the freedom and happiness associated with exile.

Neo and Thabisa cannot be portrayed as cultural renegades because for all that the narrator thinks they lost, they also gained something new in the American cultural milieu. Given the time Professor Makapela has been away from home, it is possible that these girls were born in America and there is no way they could be expected to be fluent in Xhosa. More importantly, the Professor's predicament is in fact a problematic one given his cosmopolitan/transnational disposition. Here is a man who has lived in a foreign country for many years, who has absorbed values from a foreign education system (like Moses who was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians) to the level of being a Professor. Is there a way he can stand on a pedestal unaffected by these experiences? Even Moses is said to have adopted "monotheism from the Pharaonic culture" (Ashcroft 2009: 18).

It is a fact that Professor Makapela has not spoken Xhosa (his mother tongue) for a long time, perhaps because he has little occasion to do so. But is speaking Xhosa equivalent to being culturally authentic? Is it not possible for Professor

Makapela to remain Xhosa while speaking English? Is Thabisa more Xhosa than Neo, since she has a Xhosa name? These are questions that the narrator overlooks. What is perhaps questionable about Professor Makapela is his cursory attitude towards the culture of his people. However, if Professor Makapela is to be categorized as unpatriotic and culturally lost, then the narrator is parochially judgmental. His conception of getting educated is also limited to merely reading books. When he says "trying out American beer is not part of my mission", (Ndlela 1999: 217) he thinks he is being smart, yet his academic mission, learning by merely reading books, is equally narrow. Trying American beer is not equivalent to losing one's culture. Learning means unlearning certain prejudices and embracing new worldviews. It is a pity that the narrator will go back to his country and church in Mdatsane clutching a degree but nothing from the culture he has lived in.

Ndlela's story presents two conflicting perspectives on cultural identity embodied in Professor Makapela and the narrator. The narrator represents a view that has been rejected by Stuart Hall in his popular essay "Cultural identity and the Diaspora". Stuart Hall argues that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (Hall 1997: 52). It is the aspect of "constant transformation" that the narrator does not appreciate. Professor Makapela is a transnational citizen. He has embraced the American system which has opened opportunities for him and his family. Professor Makapela is, in that sense, opportunistic and strategic. He takes what is best for him, for example the green card, which he says will open many opportunities for his family. Through Professor Makapela, we see that cultural identity is not necessarily about refusing to learn other cultures and speaking one's mother tongue. As Wole Soyinka argues, a tiger does not necessarily have to proclaim its tigri-tude (in Tighe 2005: 132).

Finally, Mokae's conceptualization of cultural identity, as reflected in his story, clearly conflicts with Phil Ndlela's. While Ndlela seems to advocate allegiance to a specific set of cultural values as opposed to diasporic intermix of cultures, Mokae recognizes the impossibility of any attempt to define culture on the basis

of geographical confines provided by the nation state. Mokae's view of identity embraces the concept of the transnation that reaches beyond the nation state to "consider the liberating potential of difference and movement" (Ashcroft 2009: 13). The illegal immigrants in Mokae's story have different cultural habits, yet they still belong together. Cultural identity is thus not only located within the geographical limits of the nation state, but also beyond the nation. National boundaries are utopian constructions imagined and conceived during and in the aftermath of decolonisation. In the new transnational/diasporic space, which Ashcroft (2009) idealizes as the transnation, these confines are blurred, negotiated and transcended.

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