

MEDIATING SOUTHERN AFRICAN IDENTITIES IN A TRANSMUTING AGE: AN ELUSIVE PURSUIT

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to unpack the complexities of reconciling an African, and particularly a Southern African identity in a globalising age. It departs by drawing parallels between one of Africa's first generation of literary giants, Chinua Achebe and one of post-independent Africa's most radical critics, Phaswane Mpe. The two, separated by at least 40 years, reveal how mediating African identity has transmuted over the years from the linear Achebean colonial era pursuit of an almost clearly defined and nearly homogenous sense of Africanness, to a more elusive and monolithic task in the post-independence Mpe-era. In this Mpe-era it is no longer possible to speak of identity, but identities, as 'identity' proves fluid, overlapping and evasive. In a departure from the seemingly stable Achebean quest for the restoration of African identity and masculinity, Mpe challenges the reader to the more complex reality of what may be termed 'a multi-identities individual'.

Keywords: identities, mediation, Southern African identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading Phaswane Mpe's (2001) *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* in conversation with the broader theoretical frameworks advanced by Hall (1996), Vambe and Zegeya (2009), Appiah (1992), and Mbembe (2001) among others, reveal how the concept of an African identity has metamorphosed over the years. The act of mediating African identities is characterised by a range of attitudes, from a clearly defined optimism or pessimism to ambivalence and even indifference. This points to the complexities associated with

unpacking the concept of identity, of African identities and consequently of Southern African identities. The discussion premises itself upon three key deductions from Mpe's approach to mediating Southern African identities. Firstly: mediation entails a process of representation and is therefore subject to the politics of representation and consequently not an innocent undertaking. Hall (1996:4) observes that 'identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation', representation which he further defines as 'the production of meaning, through language.'

The second premise is that mediation of identity is as risky as the very concept of identity itself, which makes it an ambiguous and ambivalent adventure. Thirdly, while African writers have for decades been engaged in mediating African identities through literature and other art forms, there are complex transformations in identities and even in mediation approaches that leave one wondering how successful they have been in the mission to wrest Africa from Western domination. The author will proceed to engage with the key issues raised in Mpe's fiction, broken down into sections that focus on mediating African and Southern African identities, cosmopolitanism and sexual identity, and will conclude on a reflective note.

2. MEDIATING AFRICAN IDENTITIES – FROM ACHEBE TO MPE

Forty two years mark the period from Achebe to Mpe yet literature has remained a powerful tool of cultural resistance that has seen African writers consistently engaged in mediating African identities through discourses shaped in diverse ways by colonialism (apartheid), liberation struggles and neo colonialism. Hall (1996:4) states that:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity...

Due to this 'marking of difference and exclusion' it became necessary, as Gikandi (2004, 57) observes for the 'founding fathers of modern day African literature' to engage in a literary battle to counter the imperial project and restore African dignity. He notes that Africa has always had a thriving literary tradition that existed prior to colonial institutions, although:

...what is now considered to be the heart of literary tradition on the continent could not have acquired its current identity or function if the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe had not taken place. Not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their works. From the eighteenth century onwards, the colonial situation shaped what it meant to be an African writer, shaped the language of African writing, and overdetermined the culture of letters in Africa.

This was necessary, given the fact that imperial conquest was also a discursive process of ‘the marking of difference and exclusion’ that cast the African identity as the antithesis of Europe, the ‘heart of darkness, death, disease, deficit and absence.’ This did not reconcile humanity but rather reduced the African to a bestial identity. Of this imperial literary project, Achebe (1977:215) laments and it is necessary to generously draw from his sentiments:

...white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking... Africa [being represented] as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril...the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world...a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race ...The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents ,alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people.

Achebe’s sentiments confirm that mediation is not a value-free process. In the same vein Vambe and Zegeya (2009, 7) raise concern about what may be termed ‘Conradian incarnate’ African scholars who:

...in reality...reinforce the misunderstanding of the multiple identities of Africa. They entrench the image of Africa as a modern ‘heart of darkness’ where everything that can possibly go wrong in the world is to be found...[defining] Africa through a chronology of absence ,marginality and disease, expressed as real and imaginary.

A random pick of Mbembe’s (2001, 104--108) selection of diction in describing the post-colonial state is quite revealing in this regard: ‘chaotically pluralistic’, ‘a hollow pretense’, and ‘a regime of unreality’. One would be forgiven for thinking that Conrad has been resurrected. Vambe and Zegeya (2009, 16) reveal how Mbembe’s Africa is ‘strange and monstrous, bestial, brutal, sexually licentious and connected to death, as well as an ‘object’ of experimentation’. As far as Mbembe is concerned, no good can come from his motherland, a continent whose identity he mediates with a fatalistic lens, even to his own detriment as he ‘cuts the very branch that he is sitting on.’ Vambe and Zegeya (ibid) rightly observe that ‘he is plying his academic trade in South Africa’ courtesy of the very systems that he denigrates. One cannot help but conclude that Africa is merely a project of experimentation for him that enables him to sing for his supper.

The foregoing reveals that mediating identity and, moreover, African identities, is a complex phenomenon. As we move from Achebe to Mpe, the temporal and spatial transformations and continuities imply that the process can only become more complicated. African Nations, through their post-independence leadership, cannot be totally exonerated for the negative identities of Africa that exist today. African identities are subject to the colonial legacy, but colonialism is no longer the only factor, as Africa has significantly contributed to the complexities of its current identity.

Some of the issues Mbembe lampoons Africa for may to a certain extent be valid, yet Vambe and Zegeya (2009) call for reflective, balanced scholarship or mediation that realises that both good and bad can come out of Africa (such a scholarship would even propose solutions). Mbembe fails dismally in this regard. At no point does he make the slightest effort to achieve a balance between descriptions of Africa's realities, both good and ill. It is against this backdrop that scholars like Mpe emerge to mediate identities within the post-colonial space. The next section looks at the mediation of African identities, particularly Southern African identities beyond Achebe's world of binary oppositions as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

2.1. Mediating Southern African identities

In *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Mpe (2001) presents a cosmopolitan space that calls for pluralistic alternative thinking. *Hillbrow* affords the reader a lens through which to view the transformations taking place in South Africa, Southern Africa, Africa and the World. While Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) mediated identity within what could be termed linear spaces of clan, village or nation, Mpe toys with the complexities of deeply entangled identities where these boundaries are not only being questioned but transgressed; individuals are bi- or multilingual, are homo-, bi-, heterosexual or everything at the same time, among other overlapping identities. Technological advances also imply that the individual can transcend space and time to simultaneously live out other identities, whether real or imaginary. Mpe raises some of the most pressing issues concerning Southern African identities. Without relegating the rest to lesser importance, this discussion elects to focus on three of the numerous themes he engages: cosmopolitanism, xenophobia and sexuality.

3. COSMOPOLITANISM IN *HILLBROW* – A PRECARIOUS SPACE FOR CONNECTION AND OPPORTUNITY

Embedded within its mother country's ideal of the 'rainbow-nation', *Hillbrow* provides an apt lens for exploring the multi-dimensional possibilities of Southern African identities. Mpe's use of the term 'our' in the title is ambiguous and the sets of meanings vary from a singular, unified, even harmonious sense of what may be termed 'Hillbrowan-selves', hence Southern African selves, to multi-dimensional, dynamic and even contradictory selves. It may even imply an attempt at territorial marking and protest against foreign migrants' presence in South Africa. The key factor that it reveals, however, is the acknowledgement of diversity within a space claimed by many. Mpe opens with an acknowledgement of a South African space that is a product of the plurality of nationalities and experiences. Hall's observations (1996, 4) are quite informative in this regard:

...identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicisation and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. We need to situate the debates about identity within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively 'settled' character of many populations and cultures, above all in relation to the processes of globalization, which I would argue are coterminous with modernity...and the processes of forced and 'free' migration which have become global phenomenon of the so-called 'postcolonial' world.

Given these complexities Appiah (1997, 621) calls for a liberal cosmopolitanism that values human diversity, does not seek to homogenise all into one culture and has respect for basic human rights. Despite the ills that plague *Hillbrow*, Mpe (2001, 17–20) mediates a shared human identity by highlighting the platforms around which humans momentarily forget their prejudices and differences. Through his observations about soccer he exposes the hypocrisy that characterises human nature:

Like most Hillbrowans, Cousin took his soccer seriously... You often accused him of being a hypocrite, because his vocal support for black non-South African teams – whenever they played against European clubs, contrasted so glaringly with his prejudice towards black foreigners the rest of the time... Cousin insisted that people should remain in their own countries ... Surely we cannot be expected to solve all the problems of Africa...

Cousin's behavior here is symbolic of the hypocrisy of South Africa and its sense of exceptionalism. It is a nation that has found it natural to attribute the endless list of its dissatisfactions and failures – crime, death, disease, prostitution, homosexuality – to everything foreign. This is ironic, considering that crime was already a concern prior to the end of apartheid. In mediating desirable identities within a cosmopolitan space, Mpe, I argue, throws South Africans' hypocrisy back at them so that they can review, reflect and hopefully begin to work towards a transformation of their own mindsets. Mpe draws their attention to the benefits that the immigrant community has brought to the South African economy and social culture. Mpe makes seemingly simplistic yet deep-rooted observations, such as that 'Cousin and his colleagues received oceans of rands and cents from these unfortunates'. Mpe (2001, 18) also mediates a desired Southern African identity when he appeals to a shared history:

...some *makwerekwere* were fleeing their war-torn countries to seek sanctuary here in our country, in the same way that many South Africans were forced into exile in Zambia, Zaire, Nigeria and other African and non-African countries during the apartheid era.

Mpe's sentiments are arguably a premonition to a nation that would watch as its citizens mete out xenophobic punishment to immigrants seven years later, something which Mpe tactfully yet graphically presents through an ethnic lens. If a rainbow symbolises harmony, Mpe questions the very concept of a rainbow nation in the midst of such deep-etched violence against fellow blacks. Mpe also challenges the selective memory

of a nation that exhibits lack of spirited commitment to improving the black foreign immigrant condition. Morris (1998,1123) concurs with Mpe on South Africa's short memory of gratitude when he shares the sentiments of a young Nigerian woman, Ayo, who had been an activist in Ogoniland:

When I was in primary school we used to contribute money to fight apartheid. Once we got to South Africa we are told these are the same people who are now treating us like shit, especially black South Africans. If I had to go back to Nigeria and saw a South African begging on the street I wouldn't even give him a cent for the brutality that my brothers and sisters have suffered here.

Such sentiments make a mockery of efforts at regional integration, African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism, among other ideological efforts to unify Africa as one people. Mpe further prods the government's conscience when he seems to celebrate the immigrant survival strategies. He observes that 'the immigrant had also learned a trick or two of their own...organize a false identity document –for a nominal fee' (2001, 21). The porosity of the system is a mockery of the nation. The different forms of cosmopolitanism are pointers to the innovativeness of the unwanted immigrant: it is not a cosmopolitanism premised on the values that Appiah advances, of regard for the humanity of another. Landau and Freemantle (2010, 375) bring to light what they term 'tactical cosmopolitanism', a simultaneous process of insertion and self-exclusion from whence there is an emergence, amongst immigrant groups, of:

...distinctive ways of negotiating inclusion and belonging that transcend ethnic, national or transnational paradigms. Confronted with new South African nationalism, a restrictive immigration regime and xenophobia, immigrants have reacted with what we term 'tactical cosmopolitanism' to negotiate partial inclusion in South Africa's transforming society without becoming bounded by it.

Mpe therefore challenges society to a broader vision of identity, citizenship and belonging. Identity can no longer be perceived in monolithic terms.

4. OF SEXUAL IDENTITIES AND THE SLIPPING HOLD OF PATRIARCHY

Mpe's fiction reveals that identities are in flux and overlap and that the individual body is in a quest to wrest itself both physically and spiritually from societal conventions. This explains why, whereas in Achebe's world the focus may have been predominantly on men and women, in Mpe's world we find hybrid sexual identities containing in-between spaces where the body itself is no longer as clearly defined. In Mpe's world the body is in the process of becoming, individual bodies are found shifting and sometimes dangling between and amongst genders and even sexes, men become women, and vice versa.

In his fiction, Mpe mediates a diversity of issues related to Africa's perception of sexual identities such as promiscuity, prostitution, adultery and HIV and AIDS. In *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001, 4), Mpe, through his omniscient narrator successfully reveals how mediating identity implies a calculated process of creating meaning through language. Mpe seems to be motivated by the controversial issues that society seemingly does not want to confront. His mediation or representation of queer sexual identities provokes public dialogue on the highly contested subjects of homosexuality and lesbianism. This issue has left Africa and in this case Southern Africa divided, as some countries (such as South Africa) have legalised these identities while in others, such as Zimbabwe, it remains outlawed. Mpe mediates this identity by bringing in a multiplicity of voices:

There were others who went even further, saying that AIDS was caused by the bizarre sexual behavior of the Hillbrowans. How could any man have sex with another man? they demanded to know. Those who claimed to be informed – although none could admit to having seen or practiced it personally – said such sex was done anally...dog style - to the disgust of most of the people of Tiragalong, who insisted that filth and sex should be two separate things...lead to such dreadful illnesses.

I believe that while Mpe's mission here seems to be to provoke debate and engagement in literary circles on an identity surrounded by controversy, considered un-African and a subject still strongly perceived as taboo in a number of nations, he does not clarify his speaking position, leaving it up to the reader to draw conclusions. His stance confirms how irreconcilable such matters such are in African spaces. Munro (unpublished paper) notes:

To come out as a gay African is often understood to be a contradiction in terms. Sexual identity has become caught up in the politics of racial authenticity and postcolonial nationalism, and since the 1990s heads of state ...have followed Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's lead in passing anti-gay laws, and making public statements denigrating homosexuals as...un-African.

He reveals society's fears vocalised in hushed conversations that associate these sexual practices with diseases. One of the major societal concerns he exposes is how same-sex relations, particularly homosexuality, throw patriarchy into a quandary. To go back to Achebe's world (1958, 37), 'no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man'. The question is what happens now that there are men who are now in a sense 'the women' in sexual relationships and playing a subordinate role that for years has justified the subservient position of women in patriarchal societies. While in Achebe's world there were 'effeminate men', it was quite different from the sense obtaining in African sexualities today.

5. CONCLUSION

Mpe's life ends rather prematurely, given the significance of his approach to the intricate matters of identity in modern Africa and particularly Southern Africa today. Society is all the poorer for the passing of a passionate advocate for the regard for human life. It is rather sad that Mpe's narration ends without deliberately giving voice to the *makwerekwere* identity, to enable it to answer back, deconstruct the grand narrative and claim its humanity. The fact that Refilwe first has to go to the metropolis before she can discover herself and especially before she can begin to acknowledge the humanity of her fellow blacks leaves Africa in a dilemma as it has to rely on a third hand whose interests in Africa's unity and advancement remains questionable. Only after the Oxford experience where she experiences discrimination, this time as the 'Other', 'Refilwe herself [reaps] the bitter fruits of the xenophobic prejudice that she had helped to sow... Welcome to the world of Humanity'. (2001, 113).

Although it ends on a hopeful note, one cannot help wondering if after all of Africa's effort to gain autonomy from the West and its ideals, the metropolis remains invincible. Could it be that from Achebe to Mpe the effort to wrest Africa from Western impositions has only served to strengthen its hold? Could Mandaza (undated) be right that 'Africa and a Southern African identity do not exist'? If Mpe were going to give Africa the agency to transform itself, Refilwe should have reached her moment of epiphany while still in Hillbrow, or from another African country.

However, I still believe the text ends on a hopeful note; the transformative journey that the reader embarks on through Refilwe's experiences is a clarion call to all human kind that everyone is a *makwerekwere* somewhere, for a *makwerekwere* identity is a construction of what is perceived as different and hence a scapegoat for all societal ills. Said (1979, 21) buttresses this when he argues that what is commonly circulated in 'cultural discourse and exchange within a culture... is not 'truth' but representations'. It is these representations that Mpe so effectively challenges by calling for tolerance for diversity. The text warns us that as long as one part of humanity continues to undermine another, everyone remains vulnerable. A review by South Africa of this unwarranted sense of exceptionalism that now threatens African identity with extinction, is long overdue.

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