

An Appreciation of Cultural Hybridity in Sigogo's *Kunjalo*

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Abstract

This paper appreciates the notion of cultural hybridity in the Ndebele novel, the case in point being Sigogo's novel, *Kunjalo*. The major focus is on the novelist's vision that the mixing of cultures should be understood as a connection of different entities rather than an attempt to homogenise. Using hybridity as a guiding framework, the paper analyses the events in the novel *Kunjalo* and concludes that hybridity does not necessarily call for the negative stereotypes which view cultural transfers and exchange as pervasion. Rather, cultural hybridity allows for the continuous process of borrowing and lending between cultures.

Keywords: Hybridity, culture, negotiation.

Introduction

This paper focuses on Sigogo's vision of cultural hybridity in the novel *Kunjalo* (That is how it is). Sigogo is a prominent Ndebele novelist whose works place a particular interest on culture across the various generations he has written about. In this paper, the discussion is on the novel *Kunjalo* which presents a story of how cultural differences can be harmonised without creating stereotypes. The concept of cultural hybridity represents a range of perspectives which account for the multiple cultural encounters, interferences and exchanges which have resulted in the new society. Raab and Butler (2012) point out that the term hybridity stems from the field of biology where it is usually employed to denote a crossing of species. It has become the most useful metaphor for analysing cultural contact, transfer and exchange, especially in postcolonial studies. Hybridity is therefore used to describe the diverse cultural intermixtures which should not be understood as attempts to homogenise but rather as a connection of different parts. According to Bronfen and Marius (1997:14), a hybrid is:

everything that owes its existence to a mixture of traditions or chains of significations, everything that links different kinds of discourse and

technologies, everything that came into being through techniques of collage...

This definition seems to point to the idea that cultural purity is difficult to talk about after intercultural contact.

In Sigogo's novel, the reader is provided with a fascinating account involving a young man, Fayindi, who furthers his studies in England and qualifies as a doctor. Upon returning home, Fayindi seems unable to revert to his traditions and this worries his father Tshuma. At the same time, we come across Mafongosi who is also educated and is a lecturer at a teachers' college yet she tries by all means to stick to her tradition. These characters are used by the author throughout the novel to denote the levels of understanding and dealing with cultural hybridity.

Theoretical Framework

One of the most prominent scholars on issues of cultural hybridity is Homi K Bhabha who elucidated on this concept in his 1994 publication, *The Location of Culture*. This paper makes use of Bhabha's ideas on cultural hybridity. Bhabha focuses on the collective effects of colonialism on people and culture through his ideas of mimicry, third space, ambivalence and hybridity. The belief is that hybridity is normal because resistance on the part of the colonised is inevitable and there is also interdependence between the coloniser and the colonised, hence one can not claim a purity of cultural identity. This then emphasises the point that all identity is created in some kind of third space of enunciation. The third space acts as an ambiguous area that develops when two or more cultures interact. Therefore, in order for hybridity to occur, there is need for a third space.

Bhabha further talks of ambivalence which sees culture as consisting of opposing perceptions and dimensions. Bhabha claims that this ambivalence, which is a duality that presents a split identity of the colonised, allows for the production of beings who are a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the coloniser's cultural identity. In ambivalence, Bhabha argues that cultural identities can not be ascribed to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, ahistorical cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. Nor can coloniser and the colonised be viewed as separate entities that define themselves independently. Instead, Bhabha suggests that the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable representation of cultural differences.

Homi Bhabha also proposes the notion of mimicry which is described as the disciplined imitation of the coloniser by the colonised. Young (1995) asserts that the effect of mimicry is camouflage; it is not a question of

harmonising with the background but is against a mottled background of becoming mottled. Bhabha forwards that it is the partial diffusion of christianity and the partial influence of moral improvements which will construct a particularly appropriate form of colonial subjectivity. Hence, a mimic is created through western education which makes the colonised feel inferior and desire to be like the coloniser.

Culture and Society in the Context of Hybridity

Arowolo (2010) notes that culture is not about dancing, it is not limited only to artcraft. Culture is about people's total way of life; the way people live, eat, worship, produce, create and recreate. This means that culture forms our belief systems, frames of perception, understanding and guides behaviour. Culture gives meaning and currency to people's lives and is a virtue that is learned, adopted and constantly evolves. All cultures are inherently predisposed to change and at the same time they attempt to resist change. According to Lebaron (2003), when changes arise within cultures, conflict is often a response to difficulties in dealing with differences. Difference becomes a source of fear and understanding but conflict in that context must not always presume war. It can manifest at multiple levels including behavioral, emotional or perceptive dimensions (Mayer 2000). This points to the fact that cultural conflict can not be avoided where cultural change is in the process of manifesting. Hence societies are seen putting up acts of resistance in order to avoid the absorption of new ideas. However, culture change as well as the conflicts that ensue as a response to the change can not be avoided in any society. Due to the fact that every culture has an ethical framework for appropriate behaviour, every culture has a resistance to adopting those things that contradict its story. This is because there are dynamic processes operating that encourage the acceptance of new ideas while there are others that encourage changeless stability. Lebaron (2003:2) outlines the processes that lead to cultural change as a result of contact between societies and they are as follows:

Difussion, which denotes the movement of ideas from one culture to another
Acculturation, which happens to the entire culture when alien traits diffuse in on a large scale and substantially replace traditional cultural patterns.

Transculturation, which is what happens to an individual when he or she moves to another society and adopts its culture.

The above processes give us the idea that when different cultures encounter each other, there is bound to be change to a certain level. Infact, it may mean that every society experiences the coming in of new ideas somehow because no society exists in a vacuum. There is always interaction with the next society or the other for different reasons. Therefore, processes that lead to cultural change are always operational.

The UNESCO world culture report (2000) provides that wherever there are risks of cultural tension and conflict, culture itself is central to the solutions. Culture can be used to challenge and to reappropriate the processes of change in creative and constructive ways. UNESCO puts cultural diversity as the manifestation of the inventiveness of humanity. This cultural diversity contributes to the creation of difference which can not be avoided. However, the manner in which such difference is defined and acted upon by social customs determines whether it is to lead to a greater overall social creativity or else to violence and exclusion. In terms of social creativity, one may assume that cultural hybridity can be a result of social creativity where cultural difference is positively acted upon. Culture can be regarded as a site of negotiation which allows for the creation of new possibilities rather than a site of contestation.

Inglehart and Baker (2000) discuss cultural change in the context of urbanisation where they observe that some distinctive cultural traits endure over long periods of time and continue to shape the society. This comes from a background where modernisation was widely viewed as a western process that non-western societies could follow only in so far as they abandoned their traditional cultures. However, there seems to be no need for non-western societies to totally abandon their cultures in order to adopt the modern western cultures but the point of convergence of values should be taken as an opportunity to create something new. This avoids a situation where western ways are viewed as morally superior. Bhabha (1994) emphasises that hybridity is a form of resistance to domination through disavowal where no culture is seen as superior or pure in relation to another.

Pieterse (1994) talks about globalisation as hybridization. He cites a definition of hybridization by Rowe and Schelling (1991: 231) which says hybridization is ,‘the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices’. This definition highlights that cultural forms evolve by coalescence with forms from other cultural environments. This attests to the changing nature of culture and the birth of new ways of life. Nevertheless, Pieterse argues that if hybridity is not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, we run the risk of appearing to sanctify the *fait accompli* of colonial violence. Hybrids may conform to the hegemonised rewriting of the Eurocenter. Therefore, hybridity may be treated more as a hypothesis than being celebrated in society as it can sometimes turn out to be more of a condition of alienation.

Summary of *Kunjalo*

The novel presents a young man, Fayindi who is a qualified medical doctor who studied abroad. Fayindi writes a letter to his father, Tshuma,

inviting him to the city with the intention of discussing his planned marriage to Mafongosi. Tshuma is irritated by Fayindi's actions as this indicates that Fayindi does not adhere to the Ndebele cultural sanction on marriage arrangements. Throughout the novel, Tshuma directs the process of marriage negotiation from an understanding of Ndebele customs, while Fayindi sees all the steps that are followed as an unnecessary waste of time. Finally, Fayindi appreciates the Ndebele customary procedures and acknowledges their importance. The elders also accept the views and practices of the younger generation underscoring that in as much as new trends have come in, it remains important to follow one's tradition in marriage procedures. Ultimately, Fayindi and Mafongosi's wedding reflects features from both tradition and the modern western culture.

Main Discussion

Sigogo begins by introducing Tshuma who is offended by the behaviour of his son, Fayindi. Fayindi has sent a letter to his father inviting him to the city of Bulawayo in order to discuss his intentions to marry Mafongosi. To Tshuma, as to anyone else in the Ndebele culture, this was awkward. The author puts it through Tshuma that:

Ugangile wena mfana, ungiquphune sibili khonale emaguswini, ungitshiyisa imisebenzi yami ungilandisa indaba enje! (p28)

(You are wayward young man; you have moved me from my rural home and made me abandon my chores for such an issue!)

For Tshuma, all the deliberations on Fayindi's marriage needed to be carried out in the customary way of the Ndebele; hence his rural home at Nkayi was the best place to discuss such issues as there was also a need to involve other elders of the extended family as well as proper planning. This reminds one of Ngugi's (1981) view that a people's culture and history is a great school which must be visited always for lessons of life. Whilst Fayindi is highly educated, he had not imagined the implications of discussing his marriage plans with his father alone. He seems not to be aware of the fact that the Ndebele society has its own way of planning things. Instead he is worried about his father who is still glued to tradition. On the same note, Mafongosi who is to be married by Fayindi becomes a critique of Fayindi's ways of doing things. She does not want to practice the modern way of running love relationships. This is seen when Fayindi asks Mafongosi to make him some tea at his house. Mafongosi blatantly refuses citing that no traditional procedures have been followed in order to allow her to cook for Fayindi. The above situations point to the fact that cultural hybridity is not easy to embrace as there are conflicts involved in the process. According to Bhabha (1994),

hybridity becomes a third space between the coloniser (foreign culture) and the colonised (indigenous culture). It is a way of resisting domination. In the process, there is an active moment of challenge and resistance against a dominant cultural power. The interaction between the indigenous and colonial culture constitutes the site for potential conflict. In the novel, Fayindi returns home from England with a new culture which he acquired through his education and stay in England. He becomes uncomfortable with the traditions of his society and fights the indigenous culture within himself. The author says:

Wathetha enhliziyweni yakhe... isidala kumele sipele mani! ENgilandi kawakho wonke amanyala la. Ungezwana lentombi yakho, yikholokho kuphela. Liyaziyela kwabatshadisayo bafike balitshadise kuphela kungekho migoqo lemicingolo yalapha engapheliyo. (p33)

(He muttered in his heart... the old customs should be done away with! In England, there is no such nonsense. When you fall in love with a girl of your choice that's all. You just go to the marriage officers and they bind you in marriage without any limitations and never ending customs.)

On the other hand, Mafongosi fights from another end where she sees the indigenous culture as a guidepost to the people's way of life. She ponders on these issues as she contemplates on the way Fayindi treats his parents after gaining a foreign education. According to Mimiko (2010), education is a great key to unlock, answer and solve future circumstances for a person whilst at the same time enhancing human development, but this can only happen if the education is taught and acquired in a culturally balanced manner. Fayindi's education was acquired within a foreign environment which had its own culture. He was then shaped by the cultural environment where his educational interactions took place. Therefore, when analysing his negative attitude towards indigenous cultural practices, it can be noted that the hybrid which was produced in Fayindi was not balanced because it is highly dominated by the foreign culture.

In the novel, the author seems to suggest that both the foreign and indigenous cultures have to negotiate their way in order to end domination. This is seen in the way Fayindi and his father settle their differences and agree on decisions that serve them both. Fayindi agrees to proceed in the traditional way when he says:

Ngizabuya ekhaya njengokutsho kwakho. Ngingayisebenza njani ngesilungu indaba enje? Kusasa-ke nxa sengihlutshwa yizinto ezalungiswa ngesilungu besengisithini? (p39)

(I will come to the rural home as you have said. How can I work on such an issue using a foreign culture? What will I say in future when I face problems if I use foreign procedures?)

Tshuma, Fayindi's father also expresses his appreciation of Fayindi's wishes when he says:

Yenza njalo-ke. Uzakwenza isilungu sakho sesiqale senza isintu sakithi njengoba ngitshilo (p39)

(Do so then. You will engage your modern rituals after we have performed our own traditions like I have said.)

As a result, when the marriage negotiations are over, the two families allow Fayindi and Mafongosi to organise their wedding in a modern way. Sigogo seems to argue that although cultural hybridity is difficult to arrive at, different generations should be able to negotiate in order to bring harmony and peace among families and ultimately in society. However, in order for negotiations to succeed, each of the generations involved must know their roots. It is not wise to totally throw away one's culture even if a new culture has been experienced. For instance, Fayindi tries to follow foreign ways after experiencing the English culture but he sees the light when his father counsels him. The author of *Kunjalo* is in line with Bhabha's (1994) argument that for culture change to occur there is resistance and demonstrations but a common goal is then achieved through negotiations in the third space. Hybridity thus becomes a third space between the foreign culture and the indigenous culture and should affect the hybridisation of both parties. In this regard, Sigogo in *Kunjalo* uses Tshuma to express resistance to domination where Tshuma says:

Kungani inguquko yenu iguqulela abansundu kuphela esilungwini? Kungani ingathi komunye umnyaka iguqulele abamhlophe esintwini? (p40)

(Why does this change of yours turn the Africans to Europeans? Why does it not at another point turn the Europeans into Africans?)

The expression of resistance in the above excerpt leads the author to find ways of dealing with two competing cultures without one dominating the other. In the final discussions of the marriage plans, Mafongosi and Fayindi's families allow them to have a wedding in the city of Bulawayo. At the same time, concerns of some traditional rites would be addressed in a befitting manner. Tshuma says to Fayindi:

Besifisile kakhulu mntanami ukuthi umtshado wakho uzedlalelwa lapha ekhaya ukuze ngicole umalokazana wami ngokwesiko lakithi...sizakuza (koBulawayo) izinsuku zisesekhona ukuze silungisele

ukubona esingakwenza mayelana leminywe imicingolo yesintu sakithi okungamelanga iphuthwe ukwenziwa (p97)

(My child, we had wished to celebrate your wedding here in our rural home so that I would welcome my daughter-in-law in our traditional way... we will come (to the city) a few days earlier so that we organise on how we can ensure that our important traditional rites are performed.)

Tshuma's words are an acknowledgement that in as much as culture change may be resisted, there comes a point where an element of acceptance reigns in. Although there is that acceptance, the author emphasises that such acceptance should not mean a complete annihilation of indigenous cultures. This is expressed through the words of Bhebhe who says '*lokhu kuzaphela mnyakana kuphela abansundu*' (p85) (this (culture) will only end when the Africans cease to exist). It should not be felt that cultural hybridity results in the overriding of the indigenous cultures. Rather, with hybridity there is mixing of the foreign elements with the indigenous culture to result in something that is consumable by the new generations. Sigogo brings this out where Tshuma deeply thinks about the prevailing situation. Tshuma's thoughts are thus:

Inqubo endala isuka igandelelwe phansi ligugu lesizukulwana esitsha. Ukufa komkhutshana wesizwe ekuveleni komunye omutsha akusikunyamalala kwamasiko aso. Ububi balokho nje yikuthi kuzanyikinya izinsika zawo. (p94)

(The old customs are downtrodden by the values of the new generation. The death of a simple custom when a new one replaces it does not necessarily mean the disappearance of a culture. The only problem is that the changes tend to shake the cultural base.)

Sigogo in a way explains the concerns of cultural hybridity that although it initially conjures up resistance, at the end of it all, it should not be read negatively because it does not aim at perverting indigenous cultures. Instead, it aims to accommodate those generations which have been affected by contact with foreign cultures. It is also important to underscore that individuals or generations which have made such cultural contact need to be rooted in their own indigenous cultures so that hybridity can find a place. Hybridity is only a compromise in which the foreign culture is not allowed to dominate but elements of it are weaved into the indigenous culture.

Conclusion

The above discussion unveils the vital issues in modern society. Sigogo provides a storyline which shows that the clash between tradition and modernity can be solved by reaching a common goal through the third space. This is noted where the worry that is seen at the beginning of the novel turns into understanding and harmony at the end of the story. The concept of hybridity represents the strategic reversal of the process of domination through a denial of discriminatory cultural identities. Hybridity is therefore an ongoing condition of all human cultures as they continuously experience contact with other cultures as they lend and borrow from each other.

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