4. BLACK AFRICAN IDENTITY: AN ANALYSIS OF TAMBUDZAI IN THE BOOK OF NOT BY TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

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Abstract

This article is drawn from a master's thesis. The qualitative study employed the concept of entwined and Postcolonial Hybridity Theory to analyse a fictional narrative character in Tsitsi Dangarembga's The Book of Not. Drawing from postcolonial hybridity theorists such as Bhabha, Du Bois, Fanon, Hall, and Said, the study argues that African identity in the 21st century is not simply a colonial product. Rather, it is a complex, evolving, and transcultural process: a dynamic mutation of identities forming at the intersecting forces of tradition, modernity, and colonial discourse. This often results in alienation, displacement, and separation. Engaging the concepts of "Third Space," and diaspora, the study demonstrated that postcolonial hybridity transcends the conventional cultural fusion and exchange. It extends into ethical and existential terrains. The analysis of the selected literary character provide evidence for the claim that African identity is entwined. It is a reconstructed concept shaped and fuelled by global contention, a push and a pull between local and global cultures. Additionally, reconstructing postcolonial hybridity in the "Third Space",," transculturality, and migration (diaspora) contribute to the debate on African identity. These concepts highlight how postcolonial hybridity extends beyond cultural negotiation into ethical and existential terrains. The central claim in the findings is that Black African identity formation in the postcolonial context reflects a tension between Ubuntu-based communal belonging and Western individualism. Black African identity is defined by a dialectical struggle, resulting in hybrid subjectivities marked by alienation and double consciousness.

Keywords: African identity, Africanism, assimilation, black identity, culture, hybridity, postcolonial, transcultural, and transnational

Introduction and background

The formation and construction of a hybrid identity continue to be a central topic of contention among Western postcolonial and African literary scholars. Scholars have examined how colonialism produced identities existing between tradition and modernity. Influentially, the postcolonial discourse has developed into three main trajectories: linguistic (Bakhtin, 1981), racial/ ethnic (Du Bois, 1903/2006, 2007; Fanon, 1952/1989; Said (1978); Spivak (1994); Young, 2005), and cultural (Bhabha, 1994). In African literary discourse, identity is often marked by the interplay between Western imposed systems and indigenous ways of living; this interplay has led to hybridity. Hybridity has had a significant impact on African identity formation and is a key tenet to postcolonial discourse. This hybridity of human self-identification is a ramification of colonisation. It creates the "third space" as a conceptual space of diversity, ambivalence, transformation, assimilation and resistance (Bhabha, 1994). On the other

hand, Said (1978, 1993) established the ascribing of identity as a narrative of the "self" and the "Other," previously represented as "Occident" versus "Orient".

Fanon (1952/1989) and Said (1978) concur that colonial literature perpetuates Western power through the construction of Black identities. Similarly, Hall (1994) views postcolonial literature as a decolonising medium that addresses the challenges of transitioning from traditional to modern social systems. This article employs this framework to interrogate the complexities and ambivalence of Black African identity through Tambudzai in The Book of Not (2006). The novel emphasises Tambudzai's identity crisis as a double consciousness, revealing the contradictions of postcolonial hybridity. She is torn between her self-shaped by the alienating Western education and her traditional Shona identity.

The concept of "Black African identity" is frequently a subject of controversy and disagreement. There are two views on the concept of Africanism: some people regard it as a single, unified and coherent identity, while others believe it to be a complex and diverse mix of experiences. As a follow-up to hybridity, Achebe (1992) observed that the African identity was imperfect and under continuous reconstruction. Africa is a statement that represents collective and diverse independent states and individuals, as well as an identity comprising their collective diversity (Falola & Essien, 2013; Fanon, 1952/1989; Kanu, 2013; Lassiter, 2000; Oguejiofor & Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2015; Wytzzen, 2015).

Before analysing the fictional character, it is critical to conceptualise the core concepts of this study: identity, hybridity, tradition, and modernity, Orientalism, and African identities in literary studies. Identity in itself is a fluid and complex concept, spanning both psychological/ sociological questions of "selfhood" and metaphysical continuous "sameness".." Drawing from Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) references, philosophy and social science, the term can be broken down into two main trajectories: firstly, identify frameable as a set of social labels, self-actualisation and characteristics shifting from a metaphysical relation; secondary, a fluid attribution, a contested, dynamic and relational construct (Hume, 2000; Weinberg, 2011; Gordon-Roth, 2019). For this study we frame identity as a state being recognisable the same as a person at different times (metaphysical identity) and unified selfhood by a collection of both personal characteristics and group affiliations (sociological identity), thus in the relational sense and dynamics of self (The Oxford English Dictionary, n.d). Bhabha (1994) introduced hybridity as the blending and intermixing of cultures that emerged from the direct colonial contact and their rippling effects. Third Space is a conceptual space of ambivalence in which hybridity is negotiated or construct while leading to both political change and transformative culture (Bhabha, 1994). Africanism refers to the communal or collective cultural and philosophical assertion of African morals, norms, and value by African subjects, whereas Black African identity is the lived experience of self-construction within the trajectory of historical, racial, and epistemic oppression. Orientalism depicts the imperialist representations of Eastern civilisations, thus an ontological dichotomy created between "the Orient" and "the Occident" in terms of civilisation or lack thereof (Said, 1978). As a result, this article engages Tambudzai's journey as an illustration of how postcolonial subjects continuously reconstruct identity assimilating or resisting while navigating between communal ethics (Ubuntu/ unhu) and Western ideologies of progress and modernity.

The Book of Not (2006) by Tsitsi Dangarembga is part of her trilogy which began with the renowned Nervous Conditions (1988) and was completed with The Mournable Body (2018). The narrative continuous the story of the protagonist Tambudzai "Tambu" Sigauke during the colonial era in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesian) mostly focused on her years in a prestigious yet rigid colonial Young Ladies College. Tambu was isolate from her family and integrated into a Western education system which led her in state of alienation. A depiction of the ramification of colonial modernity on the African psyche and internal battle of resistance and assimilation into an individualistic space while shedding

nativity (relational and communal self). Thematically, the book engages the painful dislodging from the indigenous ethic of Ubuntu, identity fragmentation and hybridity in a supposedly third space as a measure for survival in a systematically designed system to erase African personhood.

Theoretical Framework Hybridity

This study grounds the postcolonial hybridity concept into specific racialised lived experience rooted from historical production and not simply a mere abstract sense and metaphor of cultural fusion and blending into a politically charged ontological process manifesting in ambivalent belonging across language, education, bodily comportment and identity (Bhabha, 1994). Contextualising hybridity, it refers to the subjectivities forming and framed by the sustained contact and dominance of the Western structures over the East (including the native African sphere) (Bhabha, 1994). Drawing on the postcolonial views of Jablonski (2021), Bakhtin (1981), Fanon (1952/1989), Bhabha (1994), Spivak (1994), and Young (2005), blackness and African identity neither stem from skin colour alone nor act single handedly as the mitigating factor or a gauge for human classification, racial differentiation, or racism. It is rather the ongoing ontological structures of the otherings; thus, identity perpetually contested through assimilation or resistance of the primary signifier, the false narrative of representation known as Orientalism (Said, 1978, Bakhtin, 1981, Bhabha, 1994, Young, 2005; Bhandari, 2020).

The research gap

The is a large body of works on Postcolonial discourse, hybridity and The Book of Not, however, the existing scholarship primarily engages themes of colonial trauma and feminism (gender) with limited attention to both philosophical and African identity formation through hybridity and Ubuntu in the 21 first century. This article contribution is aimed at filling this gap by representing and reinterpreting Tambudzai's narrative and journey as an existential negotiation and reconstruction of identity transcending gendered or cultural sites while situating her within a broader African identity discourse.

The analysis and discussion of The Book of Not (TBN)

Introduction

The first-person point of view tale in TBN was narrated from Tambudzai's perspective. The other characters in the novel are all foil characters; there is no overarching point of view or understanding of their worldview. The character Tambudzai will therefore be analysed, pointing out entwined hybrid strands of identities forming among the Black Africans man in the 21st century as they transitioned from tradition into modern identities in the plot. Tambudzai, the protagonist of the story, is a young lady from a village in Zimbabwe.

This analysis is framed by the Postcolonial Hybridity Theory explores Tambudzai's entwined and fluid identity – centred on Bhabha's (1994) concept of the Third Space, exploring identity formation and reconstruction under colonial domination and Hall's (1990, 1996, 2014) concept of positional and fluid identity. It draws on Said's (1978) theory of Othering (Orientalism), Du Bois's (1903/2006) notion of double consciousness, Fanon (1952/1986) racial embodiment (phenomenology of racial alienation), and Young's (2005) critique of colonial binaries. Combined, these frameworks engage identity not as

fixed but an ongoing reconstruction or continual negotiation between the African native and colonial inscription.

Diasporic identities in TBN – Tambudzai Sigauke: The Hybrid and Fractured Self

Tambudzai's life was explored as a transition from being a village girl into a civilised individual. In the community where she was born, a root identity is ascribed as a name, kinship, and obligations attached to a physical body. She first starts to "self-identify" through these identities, as an outcome of her interactions and relational interplay with her community. The birth of a human subject signifies the start of identity, which begins with a physical object (Coulmas, 2019; Haller, 2021; Jenkins, 2008; Prinz, 2012; Tsakiris, 2017b) as shown in the excerpt, a scene involving Tambudzai's sister, Netsai's leg accident on page 3 to 4 (Dangarembga, 2006). Through the narrative of Tambudzai Sigauke, the idea of diasporic identity is redefined to be both psychological and cultural displacement rather than being limited to the physical migration only. She imbodies internalised or a diaspora of the mind, being estranged from both identities, her African nativity and the colonial space which aspires her. Ironically, beyond Tambudzai's mental space, people around her could not see her as part of them, as show in the expert on page 7 to 9, her missionary education that was designed to assimilate her into the colonial norms fractured her connection to her own people, the Shona culture and language, thus even though she was physically present, it produced a sense of internal exile. Therefore, as Hall (1990) explained, diasporic identity is fluid and continuously reconstructed through the cultural and historical dislocations but never frameable in static state. Her identity is being negotiated between the push of colonial modernity and the pull of tradition, perpetually she becomes displaced, "out of place"..." She yearns and desire to be recognised in the white-dominated, this is similar to the fellow postcolonial subject that the geographically away from home, which inhabit symbolic diasporas created by colonial hegemony. Although, Tambudzai has a physical home, she mentally exhibits homelessness, suffering from internalised colonial alienation which birthed a fragment sense of belonging.

The hybrid, Tambudzai's identity formation is oscillated between colonial aspiration and her nativity (Shona belonging). Her hybrid identity is a portrait of hybridity and fracture, thus reflecting that Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space" is a liminal zone; there is two incompatible cultural worlds in which the colonised subject negotiates and navigate their identities. Tambudzai's experience at the Young Ladie's College of the Sacred Heart reveals the contact between the West and the East is not unifying but creates contradictions of being both African and colonially educated. Her ambition to "achieve, achieve, achieve some more" is not mere competition among peers but rather mimicry and an attempt to belong, positioning her in Bhabha's Third Space of identities negotiation. Her quest and yearning for success alludes to more than simply proving a point to embodying the hybrid condition of the colonised subjects; a striving to participate in a system which does not fully acceptance them no matter the efforts (Dangarembga, 2006, pp. 21-25). This echoes Fanon's (1952/1986) claim that colonisation has produced a split in the "self", where by colonial subjects become strangers to themselves while internalising whiteness. Evidently, Tambudzai's college education exposes her to Western ideals marking progression and civilisation, while her blackness continually restrains her as inferior, thus rendering a site of tension in which hybridity is framed rather than empowerment. She finds herself in a space where she disidentify with her African self as she internalises colonial values, thus she cannot inhabit both space at the same time. This self-division speaks of what Bhabha (1994) established to be the ambivalence of hybridity, being caught up in resisting but yet reproducing colonial authority.

Tambudzai's fracture shows an ontological woundedness rather than being a sign of cultural progression. Thus, unlike Hall's (1990) concept of identity as a fluid that is "always in process," without

core identity, her identity is entwined in contradiction, displaced from home and not belonging to the hosting culture. Subconsciously, Tambudzai is a shamed of being a native and admire whiteness, although her fear of being of coming into physical contact with white people show trauma, there is a dependency on recognition and acceptance.

Tambudzai's identity is clearly defined through the contrast of whiteness, as Said (1978) will call Othering while Young (2005) engages it as the binary, an inferior black. The school's racialised hierarchy set her up as the Other, and white civility is measured against her native origin, while she toils endlessly, internalising Western discipline and language, however, her Africanness (blackness) creates a divergence bar when it comes to belonging or being accepted. This is what Fanon (1952/1986) found to be the "epidermal schema" of race, where the difference is marked and made visible by black subject's body (physical traits of the black human body).

The hybrid self is not merely blending identities, demonstrates that identity is more than a personal choice, an aspect attributed by membership in society. For Tambudzai hybrid identity offers no empowerment but rather reveals the ambivalence of mimicking colonialism, creating a tension between imitation and resistance. An identity develops because the physical matter has accumulated self-attributes such as name, race, gender, behavioural patterns, sensory perception, history, philosophy, and logic (Prabhu, 2007; Young, 2005). However, there is a continuous negotiation and reconstruction in search for belonging which Young (2005) saw to be emerging from within unequal relations of power, representing both adaptation and constraint or assimilation and resistance. Hence, the attempt to navigate and reconcile her conflicting spaces awakens and deepens her awareness of inhabiting two worlds simultaneously, and this tension is what Du Bois notion engage or speaks of as a double consciousness.

The native stranger and double consciousness identity of Tambudzai in TBN

Tambudzai acknowledged or was conscious of two identities, her traditional or village upbringing and the western education: "For each of us had learnt in infancy how to respect, but we had all, since that early teaching, discovered white people expected you to look straight in their eyes when you communicated" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 72). Tambudzai was confronted by a mutation in her society, where she had to negotiate her 'tradition' and cater for new knowledge. She had to decide whether she would embrace change or reject it, adhere to tradition, or hybridise (Ratsika, 2012). In other words, she needed to navigate the conflict between how she behaved at home and when among white people (Westerners) at her college. Boland (2020) found that migrants reconstruct their identities and belonging by consciously selecting or combining influencers of self-identities such as nationality, cultural and ethnicity, and religious and community allegiance. This navigation and reconstruction embody Du Bois's (1903/2006) double consciousness concept, where the colonised subject sees themselves through the lens of the dominant other. Tambudzai was growing uncomfortable with her native or family's rural homestead "I had long ceased finding the homestead appealing" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 80), indicative of an internal conflict. However, it is indisputable that she had access to both the African community and the colonial institution, although there are feelings of being alienated from both.

The double consciousness is structural and not a mere personal psychological engagement. Tambudzai transitioned into a native stranger, a figure living in transit – in between systems of meaning, a stranger African and not fully European either. This as Bhabha (1994) has highlighted that in ambivalence, hybrid identities are produced, while Said (1978) has established that the Western

representations are what creates the frame for positioning the colonised subject. Therefore, Tambudzai's identity is entwined rather than split, as she is simultaneously reconstruction while negotiating between the overlapping and contradicting histories, languages and epistemologies. Although there is a sense of a root identity, there is no fixed fracture but rather the double consciousness becomes a reality of a lived hybridity thus a dynamic oscillation (vicious cycle) with the colonial institution itself (as represented by the convent) serving essential for this entanglement of identity formation or reconstruction.

Third Space and Institutional Power

Tambudzai speaks of herself and other finding themselves in a space where the self is implicated – a desire "not to be ourselves, but someone else" (Dangarembwa, 2006, p. 63), illustrates and underscores the aspiration and internalisation of colonial hierarchies. Said (1978) has argued that Western institutions construct the East subject as inferior to affirm their own authority, hence Tambudzai's need to mimic another. Therefore, the convent symbolically functions as a colonial laboratory for constructing hybrids (hybrid identities). For Fanon (1952/1986), this process creates alienation into the colonised bodies, a dependence on recognition by the coloniser. Although this is happening through the ambivalence of colonial education in the Third Space as Bhabha (1994) has established, this mimicry both consolidates and destabilises both colonial power and identities (Lee, 2020). Through the lens of Hall's (1990) perspective of fluidity in identity formation, the convent produces identities in motion, as seen with Tambudzai, for her survival she produces different strands of identities (versions of selfhood). Within modernity or mutating sites, her identity reconstructs and transition into fluid site which is more than borrowing and fusion (a hybrid) of cultures. The implication or contact might be happening in a physical classroom, however, identities are not forming or reconstructing in a vacuum but beyond the colonial classroom, as seen with Tambudzai, she is navigating the social, economic, and cultural spheres, and she should reconcile modernity with the traditional site.

Hybridity, Ubuntu, and Entwined Belonging

Tambudzai's first strategy in navigating her new space was to personify the nature of unhu (Ubuntu), mimicingmimicking the character of Babamukuru (Dangarembga, 2006, pp. 102-106). A philosophy, holding that a person is a person through others by emulating human solidarity, dignity, empathy (Mugumtate & Nyanguru, 2013). She intended to uphold the African philosophy of Ubuntu (Unhu in the Shona language) no matter how much she assimilated into the Western culture - "I had forgotten all the promises made to myself and providence while I was young concerning carrying forward with me the good and human, the unhu of my life" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 246). However, as she struggled for identity she also struggled within the broader framework of Ubuntu, as Ubuntu affirms communal and relational existence. She reflected that "Unhu did not function unless the other person was practising unhu also" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 107), demonstrating that relational identity within a hierarchy that deny reciprocity will surely collapses.

Hall (1990, 1996, 1997) and Bhabha (1994) frame identity in a transitional stage rather than resolution, and this explains the complexity of Tambudzai's existence in African ethics, Western aspiration and colonial education as an interlacing influenced network into modernity. Building on Young (2005) has warned that hybridity is because of the power asymmetry and Said (1978) has indicated that the

Othering still ensures the colonial discourse limitation impositions offered through representation. However, being not being static, there is an entwinement reflecting the broader condition of the postcolonial subjects' identities as a fluid continuum marked by a binary of opposition. The re-imagining of the Black African identity can be interpretated to lead towards a critical synthesis as an entanglement and movement, stemming from a complex core identity into fluid identities. There is a sense of rootedness speaking of the nativity (previous belonging) but as well a continuum reconstruction in navigating the shifting dynamics, living in a modern space. The different strands of personhood are cojoined to each to from origin of the self. Identity then becomes irresolvable and unreconcilable self, and a visible difference from both sides, the previous and the current. The difference implicates belonging and makes the subject a climber in both sites.

Findings and Argument

The persistence of the Binary in the Third Space

The narrative supports and confirms Hall's (1990, 1996, 1997) concept of identity as a fluid construct, an incomplete unification, and a matter of becoming. In the postcolonial space, the Black African identity emerges as an entwined and hybrid identity through negotiation. This negotiation is ongoing because identity is continuously being reconstructed and negotiated within navigating overlapping cultural systems. Although Tambudzai's experience could be located within Bhabha's Third Space, her identity is being reconstructed under Said's Othering as an uncivilised "Other".." The Third Space then becomes unattainable because outside the fiction space, it is not a panacea due to the binary (an ongoing racial and structural constraint) that persists. Hence, both, Ang (2003) and Werbner and Modood (2015) have cautioned against simply engaging the creativity in a romanticised hybridity site.

Identity as Production: Survival, Double Consciousness, and Liminality

Hall (1990, 1996, 1997) observed that identity though it is "a matter of becoming", is an entwinement, as analysed in Tambudzai's identity, and is not a cultural choice of blending and fusing. It is fluid and actively driven by survival in the hostile hosting space and system. Tambudzai consciously resists; however, she subconsciously assimilates, which keeps her trapped in a painful liminality, creating an alienated "native stranger" identity. Thus, as Du Bois (1903/2006) and Fanon (1952/1989) have established that hybridisation is emerging from a double consciousness and racial embodiment historically conditioned and socially ascribed and produced.

The Hybridisation of African Ethics

The tension does not stop at personhood or personal identity. It infiltrates and creates hybrid ethical systems (hybridise Ubuntu/unhu). As depicted in Tambudzai's struggle between communal norms and Western individualism, the demand leads to the communal ethics collapse or hybridisation of these ethics. This collapse is due to the lack of reciprocity in a hierarchical system making it impossible for the intended relational ethics. Hybridity then extends beyond the cultural negotiation space into incorporating moral and epistemic practice as reflected in recent scholarship's view (Barret et al., 2025; Gumbo et al, 2024; Ponzanesi & de Medeiros, 2024).

Conclusion

This study set out to engage with and interrogate the complexities of Black African identity through the framework of Postcolonial Hybridity Theory in Tsitsi Dangarembga's The Book of Not. Through the analysis of Tambudzai Sigauke's journey as the protagonist, it demonstrated that identity formation and reconstruction in the twenty-first century (21st) century is fluid and hybridised -an "entwinement" of continuous navigation, negotiation, and reconstruction ensued between native ethics and colonial inscription. Therefore, as illustrated by Tambudzai's evolving self, the "Third Space" identities are constructed for survival and are not to be a romanticised fusion or blending of cultures nor branded as a complete liberating concept. There is persistent double consciousness, internal and structural conflict, birthed from the framing and representation of Africa still as the opposite – "uncivilised Other"..." Symbolically, structures such as the convent, a colonial institution, continue being the producers of alienation, producing the 'native strangers' of modern societies. In this study's context, the native stranger is reshaped by modernity, hybridising African communal ethics (Ubuntu/Unhu) to emerge as a hybrid form itself yet not fully disengaged from its native self. Essentially, this hybridity, underscores the limitations of relational and communal ethics in confronting structural power asymmetry.

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