Identifying National Identities in Jabulani Mngadi’s Inaugural Novel, Imiyalezo¹

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss national identities as depicted by Mngadi in his debut novel, Imiyalezo (1978). Affirming du Bois’ (1903) notion of the double consciousness and Anderson’s (1983) concept of ‘imagined communities’, the article contends that the national identities are not only a depiction of the idealised past but also the author’s wrestling with the present. Just like people generally remember the good old days when they face the bad new ones, these national identities are essentially hybrid in nature, representing both the past and the present. Rooted in the backdrop of the postcolonial theory and based on the textual approach of the qualitative research method, this article asserts that Mngadi is a postcolonial writer, he ‘writes back’, rights the wrongs of the past, as he attempts to reassert the somehow lost and threatened identities of his nation and in the process speaks on behalf of the subaltern. The article provides a deep understanding of identity issues in South Africa’s post-independence epoch, with reference to Mngadi’s debut novel, and locates the significance of this novel during colonial oppression and in post-independence.

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Introduction

Writing about the significance of literature, Ezekiel Mphahlele (1983), one of South Africa’s literary greats of the twentieth century, once asserted that literary œuvres are essentially about culture and self-knowledge. The importance of culture and identity formation and their inextricable link to literature is also elucidated by different scholars (Groenewald 2001, Sherman and Cohen 2006, Chiranjeevi 2023). While identity seems to be one of the inherent tropes of African literature in the twentieth century and beyond (see Lamming 1953, Abrahams 1954, Achebe 1958, wa Thiong’o 1967, Mngadi 1996), no study has been conducted focusing on how Mngadi explores identities in the isiZulu novel, Imiyalezo (1978). The political history of South Africa, which is characterised by the oppressive colonialism and apartheid systems, and the idealised new dispensation that is marked by the 1994 democratic elections, necessitated a need for the reintegration of the previously marginalised racial groups into new national, non-racialised identities that forge togetherness through the use of the famous ‘rainbow nation’, an umbrella concept that was coined by the political veteran Desmond Tutu to symbolise the new nation’s recognition of different races, cultures and creeds (i.e. unity in diversity). As Chiranjeevi (2023, p. 584) asserts that identity is one of the most ‘fundamental aspects of human existence’, one would have expected identity to be one of the prominent issues in literary analysis. However, this is not the case, particularly as far as the analysis of isiZulu literature is concerned. This is main reason why this researcher undertook this study. The main purpose of this article, therefore, is to investigate national identities as explored and exploited by one of the greatest isiZulu novelists, Matthew Jabulani

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Mngadi. The article intends to explore how the novelist explores the pertinent issues of identity, thus deepening the readers’ understanding of these issues in real life. The next section provides a brief review of the research method adopted by this study.

Research methods are essential for all types of research in that they inform and guide researchers as they embark on their investigative journeys to new discoveries. This article adopts a qualitative research method. Qualitative research method, Mason (2002: 5) contends, is “grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted.” This assertion suggests that the researchers who employ this research method closely study a phenomenon and interpret it. In this case, this researcher relies on the close reading of the novel, *Imiyalezo* (1978), and analyses of passages from the novel that have a bearing about this article. The social world in the literary text is therefore analysed and interpreted by identifying some passages in which the author engages with issues of national identity. Like most qualitative studies, this article does not depend on statistical forms of analysis. Instead, the novel was read a couple of times, extracts were identified and later interpreted. This article is part of a bigger study titled, *Narrating the Nation: A Postcolonial Reading of Jabulani Mngadi’s Novels* (Sibiya 2021), which was submitted by this author as a doctoral thesis. Various journal articles and theses were helpful in contextualising and interpreting the data for this article. The next subsection is a brief discussion of some scholarly works done on Mngadi’s novels. The review helps identify an existing lacuna in the scholarship and justifies the undertaking of the study.

**Literature review**

Although some scholars have discussed Mngadi’s novels from different perspectives, no scholar has discussed identities in any of his novels. It is this void that has prompted this researcher to undertake the study. While Ntuli (2009) devotes a full doctoral study on Mngadi’s six novels and commends the novelist for his skillful expertise in describing incidents and characters in his novels, Siwela (2015) critically evaluates the role of cultural analysis which catalyse women oppression in two of Mngadi’s novels. The former study focuses on the literary stylistics analysis of the novels and the latter is anchored on the feminist theory. In a literary onomastics study, Maphumulo (2012) reveals how this novelist employs character-naming strategies that embody certain narratives and thematic issues by giving specific names to those characters, with special reference to *Ejiboshwa Zotheando* (Mngadi, 2004). Because character naming is partly about who the characters are, Maphumulo’s study has some bearing on the current study although in his study identities are not directly delineated. Five years later, Zungu and Siwela (2017) strongly argue that the cultural ritual of mourning is the major contributor to women subjugation in Mngadi’s novel, *Ija Ngukufa* (2001). This brief review clearly demonstrates that not only scholars pay less attention to his novels but also reveals that none of the studies have paid attention to the subject of identity. If, Ezekiel Mphahlele, one of the world-renowned South African writers, asserts about the significance of literature in human lives, “it revitalises the imagination and the language is it written in, it is an act of culture, an act of self-knowledge. It presents a picture of society as it was, is and hopes to become,” (Mphahlele, 1983, p.6) then identity is one significant feature of literature. Therefore, this article addresses itself to this vitally important phenomenon. The article focuses on national identities as they are explicated in Mngadi’s debut novel, *Imiyalezo* (1978). The next subsection defines identity and then the writer gives a synopsis of the novel before discussing how issues of national identities are handled in the novel.

**What identity and national identity are**

Simply put, identity refers to the identifiable feature of an entity, an explanation of what it is or who a person is. It distinguishes one from others and simultaneously makes them like others. The dictionary definition of identity reads thus: “a person’s name and other facts about who they are” (*Oxford Dictionary*). From this definition, one can deductively observe that a person does not have one essentialised identity but multiple identities. In the context of literature, identity suggests personality traits, and it is informed by socio-economic and socio-political conditions of the characters. It implies a sense of belonging or lack thereof. From the dictionary definition, one can say that identity is naturally manifold. This interesting observation tallies well with Mbenbe’s (1992) notion of the chaotic pluralism and Du Bois’ (1903) notion of double-ness. This definition is, therefore, most suitable for use in this study. If identity is plural in nature, then national identity cannot be a single entity.

But what is national identity? In defining the nation, Anderson calls it an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983, p.46). He further contends that nation states are imagined communities in the sense that they are formulated with an attempt to forge unity and gloss over the differences among people forming that nation. If nations are imagined communities and identity refers to multiple features what define an entity or person, then national identity refers to features of an imagined community of a given nation state. Stated differently, national identity denotes identifiable, imaginary explanations of what unite people of a nation state. Before discussing these features in Mngadi’s novels, it is necessary to contextualise them by giving a short summary of the novel.


Loosely translated as Messages, this novel tells the story of Annabel Zenzile Cebekhulu. Like Chinua Achebe’s (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, it is a story of an African culture at crossroads with the Western culture, an example of cultural disintegration and hybridisation at its best. Set at the famous Ohlang High School (where the author also matriculated), Mngadi’s novel tells parallel stories of Annabel Cebekhulu and Vusi Yeni whose personalities are in contrast with each other. They first encounter each other at Ohlang High School and fall in love. The former is ready to have sex, but the latter’s priority is education, and he wants to save sex for later when the two are married. This causes tension and leads them to separate because Annabel cannot wait to engage in sexual activities.
She therefore dumps Vusi and falls for the school’s most notorious boy, Jazzman Jiyane. Like her, Jazzman is ready for sex. They play truant while Vusi focuses on his studies. It is not long before the teachers, especially Mr Mvelase, know about their affair. Mvelase tries several times to reprimand, guide and advise the two. However, they are so madly in love with each other and will not listen. It is not long before Annabel falls pregnant. According to the rules of the school, the culprits are supposed to be suspended from school. Fearing that he may be expelled from school, Jazzman comes up with a selfish plan so that he may continue with his studies. The plan is that Annabel is not going to divulge the truth about her pregnancy; she is going to tell the principal that a boy from her village has impregnated her. Jazzman promises that he will finish school, secure employment, and take care of her and their baby. While Jazzman’s strategy works in his favour, Annabel is expelled from school. She does not go back to her home in Ladysmith, but she decides to find a hiding place in Durban, away from her supposedly angry parents.

When Vusi jumps into her again in Durban, after he has finished his matric, she is no longer as beautiful as she used to be. She is emotionally and physically drained. On the contrary, Vusi is working at the Department of Native Affairs (just like the author worked in the same department). The fact that Vusi Yeni, like the author, matriculates at Ohlange High and later works for the mentioned government department makes one think that the novel is partly autobiographical. At this point, readers also learn that Jazzman did not complete matric but is training as a police officer outside Durban. Annabel’s father comes to school looking for her and the truth is revealed about Annabel’s and Jazzman’s affair, which is why he also does not finish his schooling.

Soon after the encounter, Vusi starts looking for Sindisiwe Makhanya, a girl who was a close friend of Annabel while they were still at Ohlange High School. Like Vusi, Sindisiwe is a well-behaved girl whose focus is on her studies as opposed to having a love affair or being sexually active. Vusi is able to trace Sindiwiwe’s whereabouts. He takes a long trip to Pietermaritzburg just to look for her. He proposes love to her, and it takes her very long, in fact some months, to accept his proposal. As they start their love life, Sindisiwe goes to a nursing school to train as a nurse. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Annabel takes her son, Sipho, and drops him at Jazzman’s home without notifying him. This causes havoc and a lot of drama in the family, especially with Jazzman’s parents. Then Annabel meets a Malawian semi-made fake traditional healer and illegal migrant, Ali Kamanga, in her endless attempts to win back Jazzman who has since deserted her for Joyce Zwane. Kamanga uses money to attract Annabel and she falls into that trap. Juliana, Kamanga’s girlfriend, finds out about this new affair and plans to beat the hell out of both Kamanga and Annabel. Meanwhile Jazzman and Annabel are temporarily back in love. She conspires to pay her revenge on Kamanga after his girlfriend, the big-bodied Juliana, beat her. She steals all Kamanga’s money and gives it to Jazzman. Seeing the money, Jazzman promises her heaven and earth, only to desert her once more on the day of the lobola negotiations. Ironically, the day he had promised to pay the dowry is the day he is marrying Joyce Zwane. After this ordeal, Annabel falls in love with Bhekizenzo who later pays the dowry (lobolo) and starts planning for the wedding. Although things have since turned out well for her, Annabel is very bitter about Jazzman’s deceit and therefore plans to revenge. She beats up Joyce and leaves her in a critical condition during the latter’s wedding day. While the wedding arrangements for Annabel and Bhekizenzo are well under way, Jazzman is planning to strike back, he does just that on Annabel, and Bhekizenzo’s wedding day! He comes in a police van with other police officers, Ali Kamanga, and their son Sipho. Jazzman’s reason for bringing Ali Kamanga and Sipho is to reveal the scandalous truths about Annabel. When the elderly women start asking about Annabel’s virginity, she tries to run away. Strangely, the police arrest her probably for deceiving her prerequisites in-speeds. When she comes out of prison, she burns herself to death. The novel teaches people about the consequences of evil deeds and Annabel epitomises this. On the contrary, Vusi and Sindisiwe represent the good behaviour that society expects from its youth.

**National identities identified and discussed**

Like Africa’s most famous English novel by the Nigerian Chinua Achebe (1958), *Things Fall Apart*, Matthew Jabulani Mngadi’s *Imiyalezo* (1978) is a novel that critically explores the moments of African cultural disintegration in the face of the dominating imperialism, a depiction of black Africans at crossroads between their cultures and the new foreign colonial cultures. In the novel, Mngadi juxtaposes the idealised precolonial past and the colonial era— that is an encounter of the two cultures; and explores the very process of hybridisation where culture and identity are concerned. While the novel is beautifully crafted, the plot is patiently and slowly built up, and the language usage moves between prose and poetry as Mngadi creates good art form. In this novel, the issues of identity are best elucidated in the very first chapter, which is titled, ‘Empambanamigwagw’ (At the crossroads). Unlike many novels, which, like films, tend to give a broad bird’s eye view picture of the setting through an establishing shot, Mngadi introduces the first chapter in a uniquely different way. The novel’s opening chapter addresses the social, political, and religious issues of the author’s times by recreating the precolonial past against the backdrop of the then appalling present condition. The author brilliantly explores the encounter between eurocentrism and African traditionalism, exposing that what once used to be the centre could no longer hold, and ultimately things fell apart, to borrow from Achebe (1958). Writing probably a year later than 1976, an era when the struggle towards liberation and nationalism in South Africa was swiftly approaching its peak as it culminated in the June 1976 Soweto uprisings, Mngad is doubtlessly in constant dialogue with the past without ignoring the present. In the opening lines to the first chapter, he writes thus:

The excerpt concisely illustrates that Mngadi, as an African writer from the colonised South African era, and from the periphery, he is ‘writing back to the centre’, to appropriate the title and theme of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s (2002) book on postcolonial studies. The use of words and phrases such as, ‘bhaya ukuthi sasiwamhlambi owedukileyo’ (not that we were a lost herd), ‘sasingadhakazi ennyameni’ (we were not aimlessly walking in the dark), ‘ennyameni wokungazi’ (in the darkness of not knowing), reveals that the novelist addresses the racial and colonialisat stereotypical views and narratives about African people as animals or sub-humans, the African continent as the heart of darkness, as illustrated by Joseph Conrad in his famous novella titled Heart of Darkness (1902), backwardness, barbarism and lack of civilisation. Mngadi seems to be aware of these dehumanising stereotypes about Africa and its black African people. Therefore, his novel is more than just an exploration of social and political issues; he is not only writing for art’s sake, but he is also righting the wrongs of the past. This also reaffirms his role as a writer and the necessity of literature as an act of self-knowledge.

In this act of writing back, Mngadi, repeatedly, nostalgically, and emphatically asserts that Africans had a wealth of knowledge and independent thinking. He points out that the African great grandparents had deep knowledge of different aspects of life and, most importantly, they knew themselves as a Zulu tribe or nation; they knew who they actually were, i.e. their collective identity. In addition, since they were not in darkness, as discussed in the foregoing excerpt, Mngadi writes thus, ‘Sasikade sisekukhanyeni nesjenjabulweni yokuzazi noksizhlonipha, nenhlangano’ (We were in the light and joy of self-knowledge, self-respect, and togetherness). The collective identity is idealised both in the face of colonialism that is characterised by individualism and disintegration, a nation of ‘togetherness’ is more imagined than real, which is typical of all nationalisms (Anderson, 1983). This assertion further demonstrates the dialogue that the author has between his current situation and the past. It is the then oppression and disintegration that triggers the imagined identity. As he reckons the past, he is simultaneously wrestling with the present, righting the current wrongs that were committed by the biased recollections of history. And the ‘light and joy of self-knowledge and self-respect’ implies that oppression begets at the time of writing his nation does not have self-knowledge nor self-respect, their identities have been threatened to the core (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). As Loomba, Kaul, Bunzl, Burton, and Esty (2005: 130) eloquently put it thus, “it is one of the greatest existential ironies of our age that identity appears to have become, simultaneously, a function of voluntary self-production and a matter of ineluctable essence”.

In addition to the double nature of this writing, namely; having knowledge and lacking one, and being in the dark versus being in the light, the author also asserts idealised African national identities when he says ‘Sasikade sisekukhanyeni nesjenjabulweni yokuzazi noksizhlonipha, nenhlangano’ (‘We were in the light and joy of self-knowledge, self-respect, and togetherness’). The use of the past tense also suggests that, at the time of writing, there is neither self-knowledge nor self-respect nor togetherness anymore. These identities are essentialised, or, to borrow from Anderson (1983), more imagined than real, in the sense that the encompassing vainglorious imaginative picture that the author paints, sweepingly glosses over the possible internal contradictory elements (the possible lack of self-respect and presence of individualism) in the glorified communities of the pre-colonial Africa. He recollects the African precolonial past with nostalgia and an idealistic worldview to assemble the rather scattered pieces of the threatened if not lost identities. For the author, identity, as a phenomenon, becomes a vitaly important issue because, as Sherman and Cohen (2006) critically observe, it is threatened by the introduction of colonialism. These African identities of self-respect and togetherness are not only idealised but also double in that they reflect the presence of the external imperialist forces that threaten to move the former from its inherent centre.

In addition to the essentialised notion of identity explored in the foregoing argument, Mngadi compares the precolonial African society and the colonial communities. While he idealises the precolonial Africa by commending the great grandparents for their happiness, knowledge, self-respect, and solidarity, he points out that his generation acts as if it knows everything when it does not. The author’s critical view of the present and the nostalgically idealised gaze on the past are necessitated by the threat that colonialism posed to the African cultures and identities. He poetically phrases it thus: ‘Yebo, yebo sabe sazi singazi’ (Yes, yes, we knew but did not know). In other words, he is critical of the Western notion of knowledge, which made the natives to ignore their past selves. According to the author, the Western notion of knowledge is lack of knowledge if his people do not know themselves. In addition, implicitly, the author calls for the recognition of African people’s knowledge by emphasising that they had in-depth knowledge of social and political issues and the knowledge about themselves. Although the author equally acknowledges the contradictions and disintegrations that characterise the much-idealised African past, he remarkably does that with great sensitivity. For example, later in the novel, the breaking away of Mzilikazi from King Shaka’s Zulu kingdom and the war between King Cetshwayo kaMpande and Mbuyaze, according to the author, are not as devastating as the degeneration of cultural practices in the terrible hands of colonialism.

The cases of the above amaZulu kings are treated carefully and sensitively probably because the apparent contradictions and disintegration come from within the amaZulu tribe. Their treatment is lenient because the effects of colonialism have to do with the self, a notion which the novelist regards as vitally important. Just after talking about Mzilikazi and Shaka, as well as Cetshwayo and
Mbuyaze, Mngadi refers directly to the slowly creeping in of the Christian religion and its emphasis on the kingdom that exists beyond the grave. It is through the introduction of the Christian religion that, according to Mngadi’s novel, the first group of black Africans started deserting their cultures and ways of doing things because they regarded them as backward and as works of darkness, thus reinforcing the colonialist’s stereotypical view about themselves. The irony that the author exposes is that, while the African black folks began to desert their traditional religious identities, they were appropriating, if not assimilating, religious teachings and practices that the colonialists brought as umphako (food provision for the journey) from their countries of origin. It is these cultures from the colonising mother countries that the African folks still highly depend on even nowadays (Mngadi, 1978, p.2). This group of black Africans, writes Mngadi, no longer cared about the earthly kingdoms; they were rather concerned about the heavenly kingdom. They are both figuratively and spiritually uprooted from their traditional beliefs and ways of life.

The author claims that one group to break away from African ways of life are the ones who forsook their cultures in favour of the colonialists’ cultures. He attributes this cultural disintegration to the arrival of the colonialists when he writes thus:


(I heard my grandfather saying the arrival of these people [meaning the white people] blunted the power of many cultures, and solidarity under the traditional leaders slowly deteriorated. They are the ones who came with education, for which we are thankful. They preached about peace and throwing away of armaments. Of course, many of our people followed them; deserting cultures without even asking why the practices that were useful and had carved them as people should be abandoned.)

(Mngadi, 1978, pp.2-3)

The oral historiography referred to in the above quotation reveals that the first encounter between the white and black people gave rise to cultural disintegration and self-hatred; “things fall apart” to borrow from the title of Achebe’s (1958) debut novel. The narrator was told by his grandfather that the arrival of the white people led to people losing their cultures and togetherness. Although the narrator of Mngadi’s novel asserts that African cultures began to perish and the indigenous people started hating themselves after the introduction of colonialism, reading the entire novel seems to also suggest that there is a mutual mingling of the cultures and identities. This results in new hybridised identities, notwithstanding the domination of the colonial cultures over the African indigenous cultures. Although the narrator’s grandfather was critical of the colonialists’ arrival, the narrator wholly and uncritically embraces the school and book-based education that they brought. What is also worth noting is that the imagined solidarity of the African cultures and practices begins to perish at the gaze of colonialism, a phenomenon that promoted predominantly individualistic notions of identities. The ideal collective black African identities, the Zulu tribal identities in this case, are slowly being replaced by Western individualism.

The cultural degeneration and the fragmentation and multiplication of tribal identities are realised through generational conflicts that manifest in the form of one generation criticising the other, men blaming women and vice versa, the unconverted blaming the converts and vice versa. Mngadi (1978) explores this disintegration and suggests that it begets the hybridisation and contradictions of identities. He puts it thus:

*Sekwenzeke le nhlkelele engaka, umililo usubahangulile abanye, abanye ubabhadlisile, bekhutha amanxebe; abanye bevwumlotha ezinkalweni, saqala uksolokonke sonke mane. Ubaba nomama basolo thina, thina sasola bona. Ubaba waziqonyelwa ethi umthetho umumalele yena. Nomama waqomba ethi ngoba ubaba uqonyise naye uyaqoma... Schupheliile ubuqotho babazali, kwandalala ubunsizwa, tabhela. Ukuziqhonya ngobunsizwa kwase kuyamalele, ukuziqhayisa ngobuntombi akwabe kusaba khona, kwaba wathelawaya.*

(This disaster had occurred; the fire had affected some and burnt others. Some were licking their wounds; others had turned into ash in the wilderness, we started to blame each other. Fathers and mothers criticised us, and we criticised them. Father had an extramarital relationship claiming the law allows him. Then mother falls in love outside marriage because father is cheating, she also cheats… The parents’ integrity perished, and young manhood followed suit. Having pride in being a young man, and having pride in virginity, was gone. People did as they pleased.)

(Mngadi, 1978, p.4)

The author metaphorically describes the catastrophic nature of the colonial encounter as a destructive fire that affects and scorches just about everyone who comes close. He also reveals that disintegration affected both the microcosm and the macrocosm of the African societies, from the intimacy of married parents, through the extended family and to the entire community. As the African communities began to degenerate, they blamed each other instead of trying to find a solution. As the older generation tries to wrestle with the present predicament, they nostalgically turn to the past by arguing that things are no longer the way they used to be when they grew up. In a sense, Mngadi also explores the psychological nature of remembering. When the parents say, “*Thina sabe singenje*” (We were not like this) (Mngadi, 1978, p.4), they are essentially remembering the good old days because they are facing the bad new ones. This act of memory recollection also occurs to Annabel when her premature engagement in sexual activities results in pregnancy; she remembers the good, which she regarded as foolishness back then, that Sindisiwe and Vusumuzi epitomise in the...
novel (Mngadi, 1978, p.52). In a sense, the older generation (parents and grandparents) are criticising the younger generation for the inevitable change that they all are experiencing. The new identities that these generations epitomise are simultaneously old and new, traditional, and modern, positive, and negative, self-assertive, and self-contradictory. As the foregoing excerpt shows, the chaos and contradictions feature in these identities do not get worse than this.

Linked to the above, another dimension to the question of tribal and, by extension, national identities, is the notion of double-n Hess (Du Bois, 1903) and the chaotically pluralistic nature (Mbembe, 1992) of identity, which Mngadi’s novel, *Iniyalezo* (1978) extensively and critically explores. Among the groups of people who were affected by the arrival of the white colonists, the author identifies yet another group, which, while embracing the new cultural practices, they were also firmly rooted in their precolonial idealised cultural identities. In this one line, which is mouthful, the novelist says, ‘Laphonso omanye umlenze ngaphesheya koThukela, omanye wasula nganeno’ (It [the group] threw one leg on the other side of the Thukela River and left the other leg on one side of the river.) Throwing one’s leg to the other side of the river is not only hyperbolic but also symbolic. It is hyperbolic in the sense that it is impossible to literally do that and symbolic in that the other side of the river, which in this instance is uThukela River, is where the white people first settled when they colonised the then Natal. When King Mpande (father to King Cetshwayo) did not see eye with his brother, the then amaZulu King Dingane, the son of King Senzangakhona, following the vicious Battle of Blood River in 1838, the former crossed uThukela River with a handful of followers (Sibiya, 2019). King Mpande later fought and defeated his enemies with the help of the white people. In other words, crossing this uThukela River became synonymous with betrayal and moving away from the heart of the Zulu kingdom and, by extension, its ways of life. It is metonymic of the departure from the traditional practices and the embrace of the colonial and white cultural identity. The two legs on the two different sides of the river metaphorically refer to the dual state of the newly created African identities, as represented by these people’s embracing of Christianity alongside ancestral spirits, valuing the indigenous knowledge while embracing formal western education, and adhering to traditional values while welcoming the newly found ways of life. Therefore, having one leg on either side of the river means this group of people equally embraced both the traditional and colonial cultural identities, which is an epitome of hybridisation at its very best.

In addition, this metaphor is suggestive of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), the dual nature of identity that this group epitomises. These people, as Mngadi (1978) aptly demonstrates, take from both white and black identities to form the completely new, dichotomous identities that leave traces of the two origins from which they emanate. However, he also shows that the process of cultural appropriation is instantaneous characterised by a lot of confusion and contradiction, as also explicated in the foregoing discussion on generational conflicts. This confusing and contradictory state of these identities is not only suggestive of the far-reaching psychological effects of colonialism in the minds of the African folks, but it is also affirmative of Mbembe’s (1992; 2001) notion of the ‘chaotically pluralist’ and multifaceted nature of identities that is typical of all African postcolonial states. Interestingly worth noting in the novel, the narrator unashamedly asserts that he is also part of this contradiction and confusion that characterise the postcolonial world. He articulately narrates this state of national confusion in the following words:

‘Sazalwa-ke thina esifikile izolo... saphiliswa emhlabeni odidekileyo. Sifike kugijinywa kaphanjwana, sasho phakathi sagijima.
(Then we were born, recently... we were made to live in a confused world. We arrived when people were running like headless chickens, we also joined in, running, into the very confusion.)

(Mngadi, 1978: 3)

The palpable psychological state that Mngadi rigorously explores, as demonstrated in the foregoing excerpt, communicates directly to the pluralism and multiplication of identities that, as Mbembe (1992) meticulously contends, characterises the nature of the African postcolonial state. It is this very contradictory and confusing psychology of the African folks, which affirms wa Thing’o’s (1988) assertion that the process of decolonisation is a psychological phenomenon. It is this group of Africans that incorporates elements of foreign cultures in their own cultures, thus espousing the new hybrid identities, instead of staunchly sticking to the tradition or wholly abandoning it in preference of the new imported cultural selves.

As discussed earlier, there is a group of people who forsake traditional religious beliefs and embraced the colonial cultures and beliefs. Another group would mingle practices from the two different belief systems and constitute new, hybrid identities. Given that these identities are dichotomous in nature, and the fact that the novelist refers to only but one section of the tribe, one cannot help but argue about multiple identities that emanate from the encounter between different cultural traditions. It is also interesting to observe that, in his preface to the novel, Mngadi points out that he had to endure a lot of psychological pain when he thought through and re-narrated the issues that he explores in this novel. He contends this issue of pain as he writes thus:

“Le nwadi engiyibhala namuha ithande ukungizwisa ubunzima emqondweni wami kunoma imiphi umzamo esengike ngacabanga ukwawocobela phansi.”

(The book that I am writing today has tended to weigh down with more difficulty in my mind than my other attempts at writing.)
(Emphasis added)

(Mngadi, 1978: iii)
The psychological ache that Mngadi is referring to in this excerpt is like the psychological pain that wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, characterises the decolonisation of the mind. In some sense, the author’s recollection and recreation of history is an attempt to understand what led to ‘things falling apart’. In addition, as Mngadi ‘writes back’ to the centre of one-dimensional colonial narrative about Africa, he is trying to ‘decolonise his mind’ from the deeply entrenched eurocentrism, a decade earlier than wa Thiong’o’s polemical and analytical discussion of these issues.

As pointed out in the foregoing paragraphs, pluralism and multiplicity characterise the non-essentialised identities as they are identified in Mngadi’s novel, Imiyalezo (1978). In addition to this assertion, this researcher wants to contend strongly that the multiple and conflicting state of identities are suggestive of the very nature of identities. This assertion is true both in the context of the postcolonial state and these selves in the precolonial era. It is, therefore, suggestive of the universal nature of identities irrespective of any political era. The encounters between and within cultures give rise to the hybridisation of identities and cultures inside and outside of political, social, cultural, or economic epochs. Therefore, the national identities that Mngadi’s novel explores are multiple, contradictory, confusing, and chaotic in nature. In addition, these identities occur simultaneously and collectively to beget what one can refer to as the Zulu tribal or national identity.

Conclusion

This article identified and discussed national identities as they are explored in Jabulani Mngadi’s inaugural novel, Imiyalezo (1978). It was observed that the national identities are essentially imagined (Anderson, 1983), and they gloss over the internal contradictions within the Zulu nation. They are hybrid in nature, reflecting on the encounter between the colonists’ cultures and the traditional African cultures. It is revealed that these contradictions and confusion characterise the formation of these new identities that reinforce and bear Du Bois’ (1903) notion of the double consciousness. The novel at stake nostaligically gazes the past while simultaneously wrestling with the present, devastating experiences of black oppression during the apartheid era during which the author writes. It was also observed that the national identities reflect the writer’s attempts to deal with the present situation and that the internal contradictions are leniently explored by the author. The national identities that the author depicts are hybrid in nature, and the author embraces African national identity while acknowledging the newly acquired ones.

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Reference List
