

The Transformation of Identity in *Country of My Skull*

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Abstract: *Country of My Skull* is an autobiographical novel by Antjie Krog that documents the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's efforts to heal social wounds and promote reconciliation after the end of apartheid. Through characters of different identities, Krog gives voice to multiple perspectives and vividly reconstructs the painful memories of South African history. This paper examines the transformation of the protagonist Antjie Samuel's identity, exploring how she experiences identity fragmentation and gradually achieves self-awareness under the influence of the philosophy of Ubuntu. It also further analyzes how both Black and White communities reshape their collective identities in response to the social changes of post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: *Country of My Skull*; Antjie Samuel; Identity Transformation; Antjie Krog

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1.Introduction

Antjie Krog (1952-) is a contemporary South African poet and writer. After the end of apartheid, she was assigned to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a reporter. In *Country of My Skull*, Krog writes from the first-person perspective of her fictional protagonist Antjie Samuel and blends news reporting, witness testimony, poetic autobiography, and other literary forms, creating a hybrid work of historical significance. The book records the harsh realities of apartheid in sincere and distinctive language, revealing the deep national trauma caused by this period of history. Identity transformation runs throughout the text as a central theme. As an Afrikaner, Antjie Samuel was long regarded as part of the "beneficiary group" under apartheid. However, while attending the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the protagonist repeatedly develops an aversion to her own identity and experiences intense inner conflict. Guided by Tutu's advocacy of the Black philosophical principle of Ubuntu, she begins to accept her identity and strives to build understanding and trust with the Black community. In the context of the new South Africa, the integration of Black and White identities and the reconstruction of communal ties is not only an inevitable historical trend, but also a process that mirrors the author's own search for reconciliation and self-transformation.

2.Identity Fragmentation Under the Apartheid System

A person's identity is not determined solely by blood ties; rather, it emerges from the combined forces of society, culture, and history. Identity functions as a relational category that articulates differences both among individuals and between social groups. As Zhang Jingyuan (1999) observes, "Race, class, gender, and geographical location influence the formation of 'identity', while specific historical processes and particular social, cultural, and political contexts also play a decisive role in shaping identity and identification".

Under the apartheid regime, the White people's supremacy was institutionalized through legislation that legalized domination over Black South Africans. Although they coexisted within the same nation-state, Whites and Blacks were effectively separated into two antagonistic and mutually unfamiliar worlds. This division was not just political but also cultural: identity differences were repeatedly enacted through everyday practices and habits of interpretation. The identity rift between the Black and the White was thus reflected in Whites' ignorance of Blacks' cultural life and, conversely, in Black communities' limited access to the Whites' real world.

Within this context, the protagonist Antjie Samuel is an Afrikaner whose upbringing and education are deeply

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rooted in her ethnic heritage. Her sense of self is embedded in Afrikaner language, memory, and community narratives. At the same time, as a South African who recognizes the long colonial history that produced apartheid, she firmly opposes the system that secures the Whites' interests by suppressing the Black people in virtually every domain. Caught between an inescapable identity as a descendant of colonizers and an inability to enter the Black community as an insider and establish genuine belonging, she experiences an acute state of identity fragmentation.

Before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings began, Antjie Samuel's family was affected by robberies committed by Black individuals. On the farm managed by her brother Andries, cattle theft occurred repeatedly. Although the financial loss was limited, the constant incidents produced sustained anxiety and humiliation for the White farmer. As Andries (as cited in Krog, 2002) complains, "...What they stole was not just things, but my life, my farm, my future plans, my peace of mind...". (p.36) This statement condenses a key element of Afrikaner cultural identity. As descendants of the "Boers," a term that literally means "farmers," Afrikaners historically constructed land as the basis of livelihood, continuity, and legitimacy. From this perspective, cattle theft is not merely property loss but a symbolic assault on one's home and future, and therefore on one's very life.

However, when Antjie Samuel consults her Black friends, she encounters a strikingly different interpretive framework. In certain Black cultural contexts, stealing cattle can be understood as an assertion of strength or capability. Moreover, some Black interlocutors question whether taking from the Whites should be conceptualized as "theft" at all, since, from their standpoint, it was the White settlers who originally dispossessed the Black people of land and resources. These sharply opposed cultural logics reveal not only divergent moral vocabularies but also the depth of identity differentiation produced under apartheid. As a result, each group's understanding of the other is frequently shaped by imagination rather than lived knowledge.

Language constitutes another particularly salient dimension of identity difference. As Ismail S. Talib (2002) notes, "Language also plays a crucial role in the attempt to achieve national identity". Language is a concrete marker of identity, carrying cultural memory, historical trauma, and value-laden meanings. More importantly, it functions as a public expression of political stance. As an Afrikaner who opposes apartheid, Antjie Samuel becomes acutely aware of the symbolic link between language and identity. When she works as a lecturer at a vocational college for Black students, a young Black student refuses to attend her class, insisting that "Afrikaans is the language of the colonizers" and rejecting a language he associates with violence. The incident leaves a lasting imprint on Antjie's consciousness. Zhang Qin (2024) argues that "language is an important medium for expressing racial psychological trauma; it endows the language of the oppressors with immense authority, while simultaneously evoking a deep sense of inferiority in the hearts of the oppressed". In pre-liberation South Africa, the local African languages were routinely stigmatized as "inferior," while institutional education reinforced linguistic hierarchies, thereby exacerbating antagonism and mutual exclusion between Black and White communities.

As a White person positioned between inherited privilege and ethical refusal, Antjie also experiences a form of collective guilt, a psychological state similarly articulated by J. M. Coetzee and other white South African writers. This guilt is not merely personal but structurally collective, shaped by the awareness that apartheid's benefits accrued to Whites as a group. Although some narratives attribute apartheid to extremist Afrikaner nationalists, the text suggests that even Whites who opposed the system were haunted by remorse, precisely because their everyday life was enabled by the same racial order they condemned. In this sense, guilt emerges from the recognition that to live within that historical moment, even without direct participation, was to be implicated in a system of injustice. This condition helps explain why, in the early part of the narrative, Antjie remains trapped in a sustained struggle over identity.

3.Identity Awakening Guided by Ubuntu Philosophy

The formation of personal identity is a dynamic process shaped by social change. When individuals feel recognized and accepted by the social or cultural groups to which they belong, a renewed sense of self can emerge in

response to the demands of a new era. In post-apartheid South Africa, genuine understanding and communication between Black and White communities require the construction of a shared value system that transcends the boundaries of ethnic and cultural particularism. Only on this basis can identity awakening and transformation become possible.

In post-apartheid South Africa, both Black and White people are confronted with the issue of forging a new identity. For White people, the crux lies in how to face up to the atrocities committed in history and truly regard Black people as equal members of the nation. For Black people, the key is how to continue living as masters of the country. Ubuntu philosophy, which embodies universal values in Africa, can serve as a bridge for identity recognition between Black and White people. Ubuntu refers to a traditional indigenous culture of Black tribes in South Africa, a philosophy that emphasizes the relationship between the individual and the collective, including tribes and communities. Philosopher Augustine Shutte (2001) offers a precise summary of it, “Our most profound moral obligation is to become more fully human. This means growing more closely into community with others. Thus, although the goal is individual self-realization, selfishness is excluded”.

Although the concept of Ubuntu originated from South Africa’s traditional rural society, Desmond Tutu has infused it with a unique theological dimension. Reconciliation, a core component of Tutu’s theological thought, has in turn breathed new life into this tradition steeped in African characteristics. In *Country of My Skull*, Tutu (as cited in Krog, 2002) argues, “In the African worldview, a person is not an independent individual. A person is a person through other persons”. This philosophy holds that in post-apartheid South Africa, Black and White people should not be pitted against each other; instead, they should take pride in their differences, thereby creating greater meaning and a new sense of shared identity. In other words, Tutu’s theological interpretation of Ubuntu has provided South Africa with a new spiritual vision and helped foster a distinct South African identity—one that aligns with the country’s “Rainbow Nation” ethos of diversity.

Tutu’s Ubuntu theology has also inspired deeper reflection in the protagonist, offering South African society a vision of community that transcends race and skin color. It advocates a social structure rooted in mutual respect and understanding, where every individual can contribute to the prosperity of the collective while preserving their own uniqueness. For Antjie Samuel, Tutu’s Ubuntu theology is not merely a source of spiritual consolation. Tutu’s Ubuntu-informed vision of community thus enables her to imagine the possibility of coexistence in post-apartheid South Africa, where people can move toward a shared identity without erasing difference.

Beyond the guidance of Ubuntu philosophy, in *Country of My Skull*, Antjie also delves into the role of geographical space in the proceedings of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The first TRC hearing was held in a dilapidated town hall in the Eastern Cape—a place steeped in profound historical significance. This land once served as the first dividing line between Black and White populations, and between African and European military forces, witnessing countless confrontations and conflicts. It is a region renowned for the resolute spirit of resistance against oppression demonstrated by its Black inhabitants. The Eastern Cape is not only the cradle of the Pan-Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement, but also a hub of outstanding education. Upholding a legacy of anti-oppression, this land has become a sacred space where all people can bravely voice their truths.

For Antjie Samuel, the hearings are not simply a workplace but a space saturated with the memories of victims. The town hall in the Eastern Cape is therefore more than a physical venue; it is a symbolic site that marks a decisive rupture with the oppressive past. It embodies the hope that South Africans can live together without being locked into the binary identities of “oppressor” and “victim”. Within this space, Black participants reclaim dignity by narrating trauma, while White listeners cultivate empathy through attentive witnessing. In this way, the space functions as a medium that can momentarily suspend the barriers of skin color, unsettle inherited perceptions, and enable Black and White people to understand one another more fully—opening the possibility of moving forward

with a shared sense of national identity.

4.The Construction of One Identity Community in the Post-Apartheid South Africa

When literature intersects with political reality, writers often become documentarians of lived history through representational art. Drawing on her own experiences and observations. In the latter half of the work, Antjie gradually moves beyond the inner struggle of disavowing the past and denying her inherited identity, and begins to imagine new possibilities for belonging. As Elleke Boehmer (1995) observes, “All colonial writers find themselves caught between disparate cultural worlds; they can draw on multiple traditions yet belong fully to none. Confronted by the discomfort of their marginal or subordinate status, they ultimately turn to what might be called their own experience (whether of the environment, migration, invasion, or otherwise, depending on the circumstances) to find their place and reinvent themselves”. By the end of the narrative, Antjie likewise finds an anchor for self-understanding and moves toward a transformed sense of identity.

After the nation has paid a heavy price for the past and undergone sustained introspection through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Antjie turns to a larger question: in post-apartheid South Africa, can Black and White people coexist under a renewed, shared identity—living together in the light of freedom? As Yin Qiping (2016) notes, “Outstanding writers and critics all harbor a ‘community impulse’; they envision an ideal social community that transcends the boundaries of blood and geography, organically formed, vibrant, and cohesive”. In the latter half of *Country of My Skull*, Krog’s vision of a renewed identity embodies precisely this community impulse, gesturing toward the possibility of realizing South Africa’s “Rainbow Nation” ideal.

At the conclusion of a meeting, Antjie begins to sing the Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika (God Bless Africa) in its emancipatory version, a gesture that surprises the woman sitting beside her. During the apartheid era, this song was an iconic anthem of the Black resistance movement and was later adopted as the national anthem of newly independent nations during the Pan-Africanist movement. Its lyrics are composed in five South African languages: Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, English, and Afrikaans. Endowed with special historical significance in South Africa, the song stands as a symbol of the country’s multiculturalism and national unity. The woman beside her merely smiles and leans a little closer to Antjie. Songs, in particular, as vehicles of cultural transmission—especially those infused with indigenous spirit—condense a people’s ethos and historical experience. In this sense, singing becomes a medium through which memory is carried forward and mutual understanding is nurtured. Their joint singing thus enacts recognition across difference and performs, in miniature, the emergence of a shared civic identity.

History endows us with memory, and through memory we continuously shape our identities. History marches ever forward; the construction of post-apartheid South African society requires not only facing up to the vicissitudes of the past but also looking forward to the future. Homi K. Bhabha ((1994)) argues, “Memory is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection; it is a painful reworking, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present”. The original purpose of establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to foster mutual understanding among people. It strives to give a complete voice to the nation by allowing victims and perpetrators alike to recount their stories, amplifying those voices that were once unheard. For only by building on the foundation of truth can people truly understand one another and achieve sincere reconciliation.

The narrative reaches a climax with one of the most closely watched moments in the TRC process: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Nelson Mandela’s wife, appears before a nine-day hearing amid allegations of political murder. Her appearance carries profound symbolic weight. Often hailed as the “Mother of the Nation,” she had long been regarded as a spiritual figurehead, and she was also celebrated for her contributions to the liberation struggle and for her influence on the empowerment of South African women. Yet in this setting she is positioned not as an icon but as an implicated subject, called upon to disclose what she knows, assume responsibility, and respond to the moral demands of the nation’s past. In the early stages of the hearing, Winnie maintains a firm stance, rejecting the grave accusations and refusing to concede wrongdoing—an attitude that fuels public controversy. Under sustained

questioning from the bishop Tutu, however, Winnie ultimately acknowledges her mistakes, expressing a desire for social understanding. Winnie's initial refusal can be read as an attempt to protect collective Black dignity and to avoid reinforcing stigmatizing narratives; her eventual admission, by contrast, signals both an apology to victims and a forward-looking hope for a new South African society.

In the new South African society, Black and White people will strive side by side for the nation's honor, all governed by the same system. This represents a new beginning, signifying that Black and White people can embrace each other more fully in post-apartheid South Africa. In this society, they can co-cultivate a shared culture and coexist with a new collective identity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) contends that "all diasporic ethnic groups can only inhabit a world 'between cultures'—that is, a third space—where they forge their own identity through the conflicts and tensions of tradition". As history progresses, this nation will ultimately move toward integration. Black and White people in post-apartheid South Africa will transition from division to unity, ultimately achieving identity transformation and living together under a single new shared identity.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly explores the theme of identity transformation in *Country of My Skull*. Though nearly thirty years have elapsed since the book's publication, the theme of identity transformation still holds profound practical significance today. The large-scale migration of Afrikaners after the collapse of apartheid, together with the persistent difficulties facing post-apartheid society, points to a central truth: the end of apartheid was not a finish line but a new starting point. From this starting point, Black and White people need to seek mutual recognition based on mutual understanding and build a genuine community with a shared future. Only in this way can post-apartheid South Africa move toward a path of greater harmony, inclusiveness and prosperity.

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