

## NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS, COMMITMENT, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A ROBUST MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NICHOLAS MHLONGO'S DOG EAT DOG AND AFTER TEARS

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### Abstract

Emerging from the historic 1994 elections that dismantled apartheid, post-apartheid South Africa continues to grapple with profound socio-economic and political challenges that threaten the consolidation of its multiracial democracy. This article critically examines Nicholas Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), exploring how the novels articulate national consciousness, individual and collective responsibility, and the moral obligations required to strengthen the nation's democratic project. Through a postcolonial lens, drawing on concepts such as the centre/margin dynamic, the Self/Other binary, hybridity, irony, and civic responsibility, the study argues that Mhlongo positions both citizens and the ANC-led political leadership as co-architects of a robust multiracial democracy. The analysis demonstrates that national consciousness, rooted in ethical conduct, attitudinal transformation, and civic engagement, is essential for addressing the intertwined challenges of crime, corruption, poverty, racial chauvinism, and youth mediocrity. Ultimately, the paper contends that the sustainability of South Africa's democratic aspirations depends on the reciprocal commitments of both citizens and political elites to uphold the constitutional values that define the Rainbow Nation.

**Keywords:** post-apartheid, national consciousness, individual and collective commitment, nation(hood)

### Introduction

Despite the formal end of apartheid and the establishment of democratic governance in 1994, South Africa continues to grapple with persistent racial tensions, socio-economic inequalities, corruption, crime, and civic disengagement. These challenges undermine national cohesion and complicate the country's efforts to build a truly integrated multiracial democracy. While sociological and political scholarship has extensively explored these issues, relatively little attention has been devoted to how contemporary South African fiction, particularly the works of Nicholas Mhlongo articulates pathways toward democratic consolidation through national consciousness, civic responsibility, and ethical citizenship. This gap provides the impetus for the present study.

The establishment of a multiracial democracy in 1994 marked a watershed moment in

South Africa's political history. Yet, three decades after apartheid, the nation continues to confront entrenched racial tensions, pervasive poverty, endemic corruption, rampant crime, and widespread socio-economic disparities. These challenges expose persistent fractures within the national fabric, raising questions about the extent to which South Africa has realised the aspirations of the Rainbow Nation. As scholars such as Anne-Marie Singh (2008) argue, that:

'Post-apartheid' does not so much refer to the end of apartheid and the beginning of a new liberal democratic era. It did not begin with the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in February 1990 or with the first democratic elections in April 1994. Instead, 'post-apartheid' is [...] the emergence of new ways of thinking about how to organize and administer

political, economic and everyday life'.  
(p.4)

In the opinion of the political analyst, the significance of post-apartheid extends beyond the formal termination of the system of apartheid, the advent of liberal democracy, the release of Nelson Mandela, or even the country's first democratic elections. While these landmark events undeniably constitute the foundational basis of South Africa's ongoing socio-economic and political evolution, they do not, in themselves, capture the full import of the concept. Annie-Marie Singh's (2008) argues that the successful crystallization of the Rainbow Nation is contingent upon "[...] new ways of thinking about how to organize and administer [the current] political, economic and everyday life" (p. 4) in contemporary South Africa. At this point, a notable convergence becomes apparent between Singh's indication of the way forward for the nation and Mhlongo's implicit authorial propositions regarding how post-apartheid South Africa might consolidate the political aspirations and ideological project of the Rainbow Nation already set in motion.

Nicholas Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007) provide incisive fictional reflections on the challenges confronting post-apartheid nation-building. Through vivid portrayals of township life, youth disillusionment, racial tension, and political expectation, Mhlongo offers a critique of the socio-political contradictions that complicate South Africa's democratic consolidation. His novels foreground the need for both individual and collective commitment to the values of responsibility, civic duty, and social cohesion. They also draw attention to the indispensable role of the ANC-led political leadership in reinforcing constitutional rights, promoting accountability, and shaping a culture of democratic participation.

Building on postcolonial theoretical perspectives including Bhabha's ideas on hybridity, centre/margin relations, civic responsibility, and recognition this paper argues that Mhlongo conceptualises national consciousness as a transformative ethos essential to the construction of a robust multiracial democracy. His works illuminate the importance

of moral consciousness, attitudinal change, and shared responsibility in addressing pressing national concerns, ranging from racialised hostility and poverty to corruption, crime, and HIV/AIDS. Accordingly, this study examines how Mhlongo's narratives propose pathways towards national unity and the deepening of democratic culture in post-apartheid South Africa.

The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, it seeks to examine how Mhlongo employs fictional characters to articulate the meaning of national consciousness within the post-apartheid context. Second, it analyses the interplay between individual responsibility, collective commitment, and the broader processes of democratic nation-building as depicted in *Dog Eat Dog* and *After Tears*. Third, the study investigates the relationship between civic behaviour and political accountability in Mhlongo's imaginative reconstruction of post-apartheid society. Finally, it highlights the socio-political relevance of the novels by identifying the remedies they propose for South Africa's contemporary challenges, including racial tension, corruption, poverty, crime, and moral decline.

### **Methodology**

This study employs close textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and postcolonial reading strategies. Passages from *Dog Eat Dog* and *After Tears* are examined for their narrative techniques, symbolic structures, characterisation, and thematic engagements with democratic citizenship, racial integration, crime, corruption, youth identity, and moral responsibility. The method is interpretive, qualitative, and grounded in socio-political literary criticism.

### **National Consciousness and Post-apartheid Public Sphere**

Within the context of contemporary South Africa, national consciousness in the public sphere denotes both individual and collective awareness of citizens, alongside their commitment to fulfilling civic responsibility in the nation's reconstruction process. Actually, the latter finds expression in the recommendation proposed by Singh (2008) when the analyst talks about the intrinsic meaning of post-apartheid. Accordingly, many of the challenges threatening the

consolidation of the country's multiracial democracy may be mitigated if South Africans cultivate a stronger sense of civic duty and actively uphold values foundational to their new nation. Mhlongo, in this regard, emphasizes the necessity of active citizen participation in nation-building, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, and political affiliation, or social class. The post-apartheid dispensation has created the conditions for an inclusive public sphere – an ideal to which every democratic society aspires. Yet, the consolidation of this achievement rests on the conscientious engagement of the citizenry. As Yul Derek Davids (2010) aptly notes:

[...] South Africa's democratic Constitution is characterised by a range of independent watchdog agencies and commissions all guaranteeing citizens political and socio-economic rights. However, a constitution, relatively well-run elections and stable elected representative institutions are not sufficient as enablers of democracy. Sustainable and consolidated democracies require people who are willing to support, defend and sustain it. (p.68)

Building on Davids' observation, one may argue that South Africa's attainment of an inclusive multiracial character constitutes one of the most prized values that citizens are obliged to safeguard, for it embodies the outcome of decades of struggle. Consolidating this achievement, however, requires the eradication of the persistent racial chauvinism that continues to shape interpersonal and social relations within the country. This position, upheld by Mhlongo (2004), highlights the imperative of collective commitment among all South Africans determined to forge a more cohesive identity that transcends diverse racial backgrounds within a unified socio-political entity. The centrality of commitment becomes particularly evident in Njomane's report, where he observes that:

The call to vote had drawn people from all walks of life. There were teachers and pupils, lecturers and students, sex hawkers and street vendors, business people and laymen, employed and unemployed, unemployables and hobos,

secretaries and housemaids, taxi drivers and sportspeople. It was the moment that most of us had been waiting for years to experience. (p.58)

Njomane's observation captures the collective resolve of South Africans to break free from the oppressive grip of apartheid regimes. This determination is symbolised by the diverse groups portrayed by the narrator, whose participation in the country's first democratic and multiracial elections expressed a shared commitment to forging a united socio-political identity - the 'rainbow nation'. By foregrounding this moment, Njomane's highlights South Africans' willingness to embrace the principles of a multiracial democracy founded on the respect of the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their race or social classes. The inaugural multiracial elections, which marked the reinvention of South Africa's contemporary identity after decades of division and violence, becomes not only a symbol of collective engagement but also the realisation of the hopes and aspirations of a people long oppressed yet determined to reconstruct a just society. This vision is most powerfully described by Njomane, who while reflecting on the election, observes:

[...] we all came there for different reasons. Our Big Brothers had promised beautiful things to those who lived a life of poverty, and I guess that the two homeless gentlemen ahead of me came to vote because of the promise of proper housing and employment. Some came to vote because of the promise of welfare grants, some because of the promise of free medical care; pensioners had come because of the promise of an increase in their grants so that it equalled that of their white counterparts. I was standing in that queue because we had been promised access to a better education. I wanted to vote for whoever claimed to have fought tooth and nail to overthrow the apartheid government so that I now found myself admitted to a formerly

whites-only institution. (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 61)

Njomane noted that the commitment of South African voters reflects a conscious awareness of the transformative significance of multiracial democracy. For the impoverished groups that constitute the various strata of a society in transition, democracy signifies the prospect of tangible socio-political change. This awareness underlies the unity of purpose evident in their collective resolve to support leaders who embody such change - metaphorically described as 'big Brothers.' For a populace long subjected and historically reduced from majority to minority status (Lowe, 1997; O'Reilly, 2001; Waldmeir, 1997; Frueh, 2003), this moment represented the first genuine opportunity to express civic aspirations and exercise democratic agency.

From a historical standpoint, the symbolism of the country's first multiracial elections as described by Mhlongo, can be likened to Tutu's (2000) assertion that these events marked not only a political transition but also a profound moral and spiritual renewal for the nation:

Those long hours helped us South Africans to find one another. People shared newspapers, sandwiches, umbrellas, and the scales began to fall from their eyes. South Africans found fellow South Africans - they realized what we had been at such pains to tell them, that they shared a common humanity, that race, ethnicity, skin color were really irrelevances. (p.7)

Similar to Mhlongo's description of citizens' commitment during the democratic elections, Tutu's view articulates the underlying spirit of nationhood within the South African context. Both viewpoints underscore the heightened awareness and collective commitment of all South Africans who are determined to reconstruct themselves as members of a unified political community. In indeed, Mhlongo's observation may be interpreted as a proposed solution to the persistent problem of racial chauvinism - one that could be overcome through collective commitment demonstrated in the citizens' determination to construct a new South Africa. The profound enthusiasm with

which South Africans participated in the country's first democratic, multiracial elections testifies to their refusal to remain a fragmented people. If a comparable determination were consistently applied to the challenge of racial tensions, such divisions could ultimately be eliminated from the nation's public and political spheres.

Mhlongo's (2004) stance is exemplified in the character of Dunga, who embodies the spirit of individual awareness and commitment essential to South Africa's nation-building process. Unlike the majority of South Africans who took to the street to celebrate the advent of multiracial democracy after the first democratic elections, Dunga remains focused on his professional responsibilities. As Njomane observes, even though a public holiday, Dunga insists on returning to the office, declaring "I have a lot of work to catch up on at the office and I'll probably work my arse off the whole bloody day [...] But I have to do it. I'm snowed under" (p.64) and cannot afford to neglect his duties. This look exposed his recognition that the consolidation of democracy requires more than symbolic celebration; it demands sustained commitment to the effective functioning of the state. By prioritising his work over the festivities, Dunga illustrates the values of responsibility, discipline, and civic duty that must guide South Africans in the ongoing project of nation-building. Thus, the distinctive element of Dunga's attitude lies in his conviction that the emergence of multiracial democracy is not an end in itself but rather the beginning of the greater task for which South Africans struggled throughout the long years of apartheid.

Mhlongo (2004) portrays Dunga as the epitome of a committed South African who has recognized his responsibility towards the needs of the emerging multiracial democracy. The symbolism of this character, within the broader scope of Mhlongo's vision of the nation-building process, is vividly delineated by Njomane. To justify his friend's seemingly unusual outlook Njomane recalls in a flashback that Dunga, who is two years his senior, had graduated from the University of the North in Turfloop with a B Juris degree in 1993, and by 1994 "[...] had started serving his articles at the Blackheath law firm

downtown in February” (p.66). The significance of this flashback in highlighting the character’s commitment to the reconstruction of the new nation is further emphasized when Njomane explains that:

When I failed to get an exemption at my first attempt in standard ten, he had passed his. I think the reason Dunga got his matric exemption in 1990 when most of us failed was his determination to become a lawyer. His mother [...] encouraged him, and while we were sitting at home celebrating the release of political prisoners, Dunga often went to the Lenasia library to study. He also didn’t involve himself much in the student protests that came with angry slogans like ‘pass one - pass all’ which some of us thought were the perfect way to get our exemptions. Because of that belief I had to go back and redo my matric the following year in order to get an exemption. (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 66)

In essence, Dunga’s commitment to the needs of the new South Africa is evident in his response to the historic events of the 1990s, culminating in the country’s first democratic elections. His maturity expressed through a strong sense of responsibility, assumes symbolic significance when his determination to be a lawyer emerges as the driving force behind his desire to participate in nation-building. For him, studying law is a way of preparing to join the country’s future decision-makers, and what is most commendable about this outlook is his awareness that only hard work can enable him to fulfil this aspiration. This awareness explains his disinterest in the commonplace celebrations of his community, such as the release of political prisoners. In his view, the present - already secured by the advent of multiracial democracy – requires less celebration than preparation for the future. It is on this basis that he distances himself from the unrealistic students’ protest marches of the early 1990s. The second basis for his commitment lies in his family fate as victims of the apartheid regimes. As Njomane recounts, “Dunga’s father had disappeared in the

early 1970s when he was only a year old and it was still a mystery as to whether he was alive or dead. The authorities refused to presume him dead without any evidence, so his mother was still married to his ghost” (Mhlongo, 2004, p.66). His determination to become a lawyer thus reflects not only personal ambition but also a deep desire to contribute to justice in the new democracy, ensuring that the racially induced injustices of the past are never repeated.

Mhlongo (2004) exposes the persistence of racial, ethnic, and cultural chauvinism as a major obstacle to South Africa’s nation-building process, stressing that such division can only be overcome through awareness of their irrelevance. His call is particularly directed at the black population, some of whom still harbour resentment towards the Afrikaner community despite the reconciliatory foundations of inclusive democracy. The controversy over renaming of national public holidays exemplifies this fragile reconciliation: while Dworkin’s resistance highlights the lingering division, Babes’ defence of the new leadership’s decision reflects Mhlongo’s stance that black South Africans must embrace such initiatives as essential to sustaining the peace and unity for which they had fought for decades. For Babes, Dworkin - like most blacks - is expected to view the government’s decision as a positive gesture towards fostering reconciliation and a shared national purpose. The renaming of previously offensive public holidays is a necessary step to dismantle notions of cultural superiority and the Self/Other divide in democratic South Africa. Thus, Babes’ call for black South Africans to uphold the new ethos of reconciliation is timely, as she tells Dworkin “[...] we cannot afford another war of hatred. We are tired and need peace and unity” (Mhlongo, 2004, p.213). Her outcry emphasizes the needed collective involvement in promoting peace and unity through symbolic changes that once evoked division.

Babes asserts that the symbolic erasure of historically ambiguous or offensive names, replaced by designations grounded in reconciliation, constitutes necessary measure for the consolidation of post-apartheid South Africa – a process that demands the active endorsement of



all citizens, particularly the black community. In her view, any stance falling short of this imperative, as exemplified by Dworkin, represents a retrogressive re-inscription of the racialized violence and antagonisms from which the nation has emerged as a multiracial democratic polity. This call for collective commitment is further reinforced by Njomane, who elucidates to Dworkin the broader socio-political significance of these transformations:

[...] I think the present name is best because there are no ambiguities about it [...] when the holiday was called Dingane's Day blacks and whites celebrated it differently. On the one hand whites celebrated their bravery in defeating Dingane. They dedicated this day to Dingane in order to fool black people into believing that the contribution that their troublesome hero had made to the history of South Africa was being honoured. The paradox was that as whites celebrated the death of the troublesome 'Kaffir King' [...] 'blacks mourned his death'. (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 214)

Like Babes, Njomane explains to his friend that the renaming of formerly offensive public holidays, such as Dingane's Day, serves as a symbolic act of burying the man-made divisions and constructs that separated blacks and whites for over four decades. Expounding on the significance of these changes, Njomane draws his friend's attention to the broader implications, which signal a new culture of peaceful coexistence, in which blacks and whites no longer perceive each other as victor and vanquished, but as a people sharing a common history and united by a common purpose. To Njomane, as to Babes, it is this vision that Dworkin - and symbolically, all blacks - should endorse, for it underpins the freedom they now enjoy as citizens with equal rights to those of whites.

Babes' and Njomane's calls for awareness and commitment, premised on the responsibility of black South Africans towards the new democracy, parallel Hannah Arendt's conception of civic responsibility, as noted by Bhabha (2003) who echoes her assertion, "we are

not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutual equal rights" (p.169). For her, legitimacy arises when individuals recognize their responsibility to the political entity that ensures equal rights for all. This view aligns with Babes' and Njomane's appeal to the Black community to accept aspects of the political settlement adopted by the new leadership. The future of South Africa, they crave for, depends on citizens' collective willingness to transcend the past, since only through such reconciliation can be the relevance and legitimacy of its multiracial democracy be secured.

Furthermore, Mhlongo's (2007) suggested solution to the persistent upsurge of racial tension is reflected in the argument between Bafana and his mother over the irrelevance of cultural and ethnic chauvinism, which still characterises the attitudes of many black South Africans. The significance of this debate lies in its symbolism, particularly in Bafana's call for collective awareness directed towards the black community, whose members are not yet prepared to embrace the multiracial and multicultural nature of their democracy. This becomes evident when he tells his mother, who represents the unforgiving blacks:

[...] the only black people that are preserving their culture are those that find it difficult to rise above the yoke of poverty [...] They're the ones selling fruit and vegetables in spaza shops and chicken feet on the pavements [...] You can't think big in African languages [...] and you can't move out of the township either. I don't want to be trapped in Soweto forever [...] when I enter our family house in Chi I can smell the poverty inside. (p. 175)

Bafana's defence of cultural pluralism constitutes a clear appeal to black South Africans, symbolised by his mother, who remain reluctant to embrace the country's entrenched multiculturalism within a multiracial democracy. His stance acquires symbolic significance in the broader context of a new South Africa striving to transcend long-standing binaries of Self/Other, centre/margin

imposed by apartheid. In essence, Bafana's position may thus be read as Mhlongo's opinion of how post-apartheid South Africa can overcome the enduring legacy of racism and foster a prosperity that is mutually beneficial, particularly for the black population. This view becomes most apparent when Bafana insists to his mother that poverty in their community can only be alleviated if she and others renounce the ethnic and cultural chauvinism that continue to shape their worldview. Bafana calls on black South Africans to reject the ethno-cultural mindset that perpetuates the enduring effects of apartheid-imposed poverty. He contends that meaningful engagement with other races – symbolically represented by whites – and with the English Language and its associated cultural outlooks is essential for accessing the opportunities afforded by a democratic, multiracial South Africa.

In the light of the above, Mhlongo's characters, Babes, Njomane, and Bafana, exemplify Ernest Renan's assertion that "[...] the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (Bhabha, 1995, p.19). Their calls underscore the imperative for South Africans to acknowledge a shared history of suffering on both sides of the former racial divide and to convert its legacies into the basis for constructing a cohesive, multiracial polity. By urging Dworkin – and, symbolically, the wider black community – to accept the renaming of public holidays, they advance the necessity of embracing whites as compatriots with whom they share a complex but unifying historical experience.

Similarly, Bafana's critique of black racial and ethnic chauvinism constitutes a call – symbolised through his mother – for the black community to embrace and commit to a new South African way of life ingrained in multiracialism and multiculturalism. For him, these represent the only viable pathways forward for black youths trapped in the vicious circle of township poverty. Against this backdrop, Bafana suggests that figures such as his mother and Dworkin must recognize the necessity of integrating into the emerging multicultural and multiracial order, which alone can improve their welfare after decades of

systemic deprivation. To conclude Mhlongo's position on the racial question, it can be argued that his characters advocate for a genuine hybridization of the South African public sphere – as the essential condition for enabling black South Africans to fully benefit from the opportunities of multiracial democracy. As Smith and Lindeman (1951) observe, "Persons striving to adapt themselves to the democratic way of life are required to discipline themselves to one variety of unity, namely unity which is achieved through the creative use of diversity" (p.91). This vision is reflected in the characters' actions: Dunga's awareness and commitment, Babes' and Njomane's views on the symbolic renaming of public holidays, and Bafana's endorsement of cultural pluralism, collectively portray Mhlongo's stance on overcoming racial and cultural chauvinism, a challenge that continues to hinder South Africa's transition into a fully realized multiracial democracy. In fact, the characters' calls for commitment align with Boyce's (1999) assertion that "nationhood is achieved within a state when the citizens of that particular country perceive themselves as belonging to a specific territory, actively identify themselves with the state institutions, and feel a sense of shared values" (p.236).

Mhlongo's critique of affirmative action and its detrimental effects in the townships reinforces, and runs parallel to, his broad perspective on racial tension. In line with the perspectives of Dunga, Babes, Njomane, and Bafana, Sis Zinhle's condemns the Sowetans' protest against the government's policy of prepaid water and electricity bills, dismissing their claims as unfounded while questioning the rationale behind the protest march:

Why? [...] I mean, the government has promised to write off all their debts if the people agree on the installation. Isn't that a good thing, chomza, huh? [...] You said that you owe R14000 in unpaid services. Imagine what that could do for someone experiencing financial problems [...] nothing is for free in this world, Chomza, and the people must learn. I heard the

government is willing to give six kilolitres of water and fifty kilowatts of electricity per month to those who allow the prepaid water and electricity meters to be installed. Is that not generous? (Mhlongo, 2007, pp. 161-62)

To Sis Zinhle, the Sowetans must support the new government, which is already addressing poverty in the townships through the subsidised basic services. She argues to Bafana's mother that their claims are unfounded, since government measures are to ensure that black communities now access essential amenities at reduced costs. Her rhetorical questions, directed to both her friend and symbolically to all black South Africans, show her position as a call for collective commitment to the ANC-led nation-building project. Crucially, she reminds her community that no democracy offers free services. In fact, Multiracial democracy and affirmative action, she insists, do not exempt blacks from contributing to national growth; rather, they provide an opportunity to join the leadership in promoting the welfare of all citizens. Through Sis Zinhle's stance, Mhlongo suggests that the success of nation-building depends on black South Africans recognising the self-defeating consequences of certain entrenched attitudes and ways of life.

So far, Mhlongo's position on the racial question and the way forward clearly reflects Njabulo Ndebele's view as to the responsibility of the post-apartheid writer, who must write with an awareness of the irony that surrounds the country's history of protest, since this provides a pathway towards attaining nationhood. As Ndebele argues, the post-apartheid writer's attempt to "moving 'beyond protest' [...] can only work if the writer genuinely believes in the oppressed, in the first instance, as makers of the future – a future that has today arrived or, is now arriving" (Geertsema, 2004, p.760). A critical analysis of Mhlongo's stance, in relation to South Africans' commitment during the first democratic elections, Dunga's sense of awareness and commitment, Babes' and Njomane's calls for responsibility from blacks, Bafana's defence of cultural pluralism, and Sis Zinhle's criticism of the protesting Sowetans,

provide apt illustrations of his use of irony. Mhlongo positions himself and the formerly oppressed - symbolised by his black characters - as agents in the reconstruction of a non-racial and democratic South Africa. This vision aligns with Ndebele's understanding of the writer's duty, namely to "[...] genuinely believes in the oppressed, in the first instance, as makers of the future – a future that has today arrived or, is now arriving" (Geertsema, 2004, p.760).

### **Attitudinal Transformation and the Consolidation of Multiracial Democracy**

In addition to the imperative of black South Africans' commitment to sustaining the reconciliatory foundation of their democracy by rejecting racial and cultural chauvinism, a change in attitude is crucial to consolidating of the nation's path to prosperity. Refraining from the regressive attitudes of the past is therefore central to addressing many of the country's challenges, including the misappropriation of affirmative action. Mhlongo (2004) argues that an attitudinal shift is essential for curbing violent crime, which persist in the townships partly because of a tacit tolerance of practices that encourage it. This view is delineated through Dunga's character, who calls for a collective commitment to values necessary for nation-building. His warning to Themba against purchasing stolen goods illustrates how such behaviour perpetuates social disorder and undermines reconstruction. The symbolic force of Dunga's stance is further revealed when Njomane recounts their encounter with two youths who are selling stolen musical equipment. While his friends consider the purchase as an opportunity to own such equipment, Dunga rebukes them, "Those goods might have been stolen from your relative or even from your own home, do you know that? [...]" ( p.97). For Dunga, buying stolen property indirectly sustains the cycle of robbery and violent crime, exposing the buyers themselves to potential victimization. From a broader symbolic perspective, Dunga's disapproval of Themba's attitude constitutes a call for black South Africans generally to confront the consequences of condoning crime and recognize that they risk becoming its ultimate victims. This is evident when Dunga, responding to Themba's reminder -



“Since when have you become a saint?[...] Have you forgotten that you bought the speakers for your musical system from the same people?” – replies, “That was two years ago” (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 97). This pertinent exchange highlights Dunga’s conviction that, with the advent of multiracial democracy, blacks such as Themba need to abandon the protest-oriented outlook that shaped their actions during apartheid and adopt a more constructive disposition aimed at fostering the unity now present in the country. Protest-driven acts of theft and violence, once endorsed by blacks such as Dunga as legitimate resistance against the apartheid state – where any action that could harm the white community was celebrated – are, in his view, no longer compatible with the contemporary socio-political ethos founded on reconciliation between blacks and whites. The symbolic significance of Dunga’s call for awareness and commitment, directed at Themba and others still trapped in the past, achieves its intended effect of awakening national consciousness when Njomane admits, in the midst of the argument between his friends, “I never uttered a word, but in a way I sided with Dunga” (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 97).

This indispensable need for national consciousness, inherent in Dunga’s stance, becomes clearer when Mhlongo (2004) deliberately creates a scene that symbolically reinforces the character’s position, which may also be read as reflective of the authors. This occurs when Njomane and Dunga witness a mob action on the streets of Johannesburg, where two black youths are lynched for stealing. The significance of the episode lies in Njomane’s shock when he declares:

[...] I caught a glimpse of one of the victims’ bloodstained face. My heart sank as I realised that his damaged face was familiar to me. He was one of the guys who had come to my house on the day of the national elections to negotiate the sale of some sound equipment. I looked at Dunga to see whether he had also recognised the man. (pp.184-85)

Njomane’s display of shock is significant because it emphasizes the relevance of Dunga’s call for awareness of the dangers of promoting crime. It

dawns on Njomane that the fatal end of these boys represents the destructive consequences of crime, which Dunga had previously tried to draw his friends’ attention to. If Njomane’s shock at the scene is important, Dunga’s remark to him - “so crime indeed pays [...] Remember what I was telling Themba the day he bought those stolen goods” (Mhlongo, 2004, p.185) - is even more symbolic, as he explicitly apportions blame to Themba and others like him for the loss of lives that could have been prevented if they had not condoned or promoted crime. Dunga’s outlook represents Mhlongo’s proposed solution to the recent upsurge in violent crimes in the country, though it carries a racial undertone. In other words, the author appears more concerned with what black South Africans can do to curb crimes than with what all South Africans collectively can do to arrest its spread. Nevertheless, if his racial group takes heed of the solution he propounds, then crimes of all kinds in the country could be considerably reduced.

In a manner similar to his treatment of crimes, Mhlongo (2007) indicates that the pervasive corruption existing in South Africa can only be mitigated through a heightened collective awareness of its destructive consequences and a resolute commitment to denouncing those who perpetuate it. This solution finds expression in the collective legal intervention of a group of lawyers who represent victims of corruption in the dispute between Bafana’s family and Mr Sekoto. The narrator indicated that Mr. Sekoto’s legal representatives have instituted charges against members of the narrator’s family, accusing them of fraudulently acquiring RDP houses in Slovoville and Snake Park:

Those RDP houses originally belonged to Linda Motaung from Orlando East and Gugulethu Marumo from Meadowlands Zone 7 respectively [...] it seems Mr Sekoto’s lawyers have blown the whistle on the corrupt officials and contacted these people to lodge a claim against your brothers. (pp.73-74)

The actions of Mr Sekoto’s lawyers exemplify the necessity of collective commitment in the fight

against corruption in South Africa. Their defence of the victims of corrupt practices, and their opposition to perpetrators such as Bafana's uncles and the housing officials, symbolically underscores the imperative for those entrusted with upholding the laws to ensure the protection of the rights of the less privileged. From a postcolonial perspective, this group of lawyers, much like the protesting lesbians and gays, can be viewed as representatives of conscious South African citizenry whose interventions create spaces for speaking, (borrowing from Spivak (1995)), on behalf of marginalised groups who, by virtue of their silenced condition, risk becoming a new class of subalterns within a democratic, multiracial South Africa. From a political standpoint, these examples of collective actions reflect Steven Friedman's (2008) conception of the real meaning of democracy in the African perspective. This parallel between the fictional representations and Friedman's argument becomes evident when he contends that:

[...] understanding of democracy locates collective action by citizens at the core of the democratic project because it is through collective action that citizens both achieve and sustain democracy. Democratic broadening and deepening depend on the degree to which ever greater numbers of citizens enjoy the capacity to act increasingly effectively in concert to hold power-holders to account. (p.5)

From this critical standpoint, it may be argued that the actions of the gay and lesbian community, together with those of the lawyers representing Mr Sekoto, constitute significant efforts aimed at achieving, consolidating, and sustaining the foundational principles of South Africa's multiracial democracy. These instances, as previously discussed, may thus be read as Mhlongo's proposals for charting the way forward in the post-apartheid dispensation. Borrowing from Friedman (2008), such proposals emphasize the need for citizens to continually hold the custodians of state power accountable if they are to preserve and extend the freedom ushered in by multiracial democracy.

From a slightly different yet related angle on the discourse of crime, the episode involving Njomane and Thek's resistance to forgery and piracy illustrate symbolic rejection of the culture of illegality that undermines South Africa's economic integrity. Their refusal to succumb to the temptation of purchasing counterfeit Nike sports shoes, despite the appeal of a lower price, foregrounds an ethical stance against practices that perpetuate economic sabotage and normalize criminality in everyday life. In this regard, Njomane's intervention to dissuade Thek from acquiring the counterfeit item is not merely a moment of personal integrity but a microcosmic gesture toward safeguarding the values of authenticity, accountability, and collective economic responsibility in post-apartheid dispensation:

[...] I examined the shoe. It was different from other Nike shoes I knew. The logo on this particular shoe pointed in the opposite direction. Suspiciously I looked again: the logo started with a letter M instead of the usual N. Because of our over-familiarity with Nike logo, we had nearly bought a fake product. We were about to buy a Mike shoe. (Mhlongo, 2004, p.70)

One notices that the characters' rejection of the fake goods stems from their awareness of the destructive consequences of forgery and piracy on the economic growth of their country – a growth upon which the process of nation-building depends. This ill has a particularly negative impact on the local businesses that trade in authentic brands of both foreign and locally produced goods. Thus, when Njomane declares "[...] we negotiated our way through the crowded stalls on the pavement. We were no longer interested in buying anything. We were too busy trying to figure out whether everything sold by those vendors was a fake" (Mhlongo, 2004, p.71), it becomes a significant indication of the way forward in a country plagued by the undesirable consequences of fraud, forgery and even corruption. The symbolism of this incident lies in the fact that Mhlongo, through his main characters, advocates a boycott of counterfeit goods, which have become

a major obstacle to the nation's economic prosperity.

Apart from the above, post-apartheid South Africa is also a country plagued by the alarming prevalence of HIV/AIDS, and Mhlongo (2004) suggests that the solution to this crisis lies in a change of sexual habits among citizens. This is evident through Njomane and his cycle of friends - Dworkin, Babes, Themba and Thek – who emphasize the crucial need to raise awareness among young black South Africans, the group most severely affected by the pandemic. The author's concern for this vulnerable group is illustrated in a bar scene where the narrator and his friends encounter two provocatively dressed coloured girls. When Dworkin openly admires them, Babes warns him and the others: "Ho! Guys, you must be careful nowadays [...] because AIDS kills [...]" (p.119). In this moment, Babes issues a wake-up call not only to her male friends but also symbolically to all young black South Africans, underscoring the fatal consequence of reckless sexual behaviour. She draws their attention to the reality that the disease exists in their country and indiscriminately claims the lives of its victims. Thus, her warning stresses the urgent necessity for responsible sexual conduct among the youths.

The author's call for awareness among the black youths becomes particularly striking when Mhlongo presents Njomane as contracting a venereal disease. Far from being a mere subplot, this episode functions as a symbolic warning and an ironic commentary on the complacency of South African youths in the face of a health crisis of national proportions. Njomane's infection exposes the urgency of adopting responsible sexual behaviour as a prerequisite for curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS, a reality to which he had previously remained oblivious. Mhlongo's strategy here is deliberately ironic. Njomane only becomes conscious of the dangers of reckless sexual conduct after he has already fallen victim to its consequences. His visit to the university hospital, initially to treat what he considers a minor sexually transmitted infection, becomes a moment of reluctant self-awareness. The irony is deepened when he suddenly notices the HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns plastered on street

billboards – signs that had always been in his environment but that he had consistently ignored. This belated recognition mirrors the broader attitude of many youths who live amidst constant warnings but fail to internalize them until personal experience compels them. In this way, Mhlongo uses Njomane's personal lapse as a synecdoche for a generational crisis: the tendency of young people to disregard preventative messages until it is too late. This episode critiques not only individual irresponsibility but also a wider cultural negligence that normalizes risky sexual behaviour. By dramatizing Njomane's belated awareness, Mhlongo positions early consciousness and behavioural change as urgent conditions for survival, while simultaneously exposing the irony of a society saturated with warnings that remain largely unheeded:

I always ignored the big billboard at the end of the street, even though I passed it on my way to campus every day. However, that particular Monday it got my attention. There was a red ribbon on it and a hand holding a condom. The inscription read: DON'T BE SORRY, BE CAREFUL. AIDS KILLS. BE WISE AND ALWAYS USE A CONDOM. DON'T BECOME ANOTHER STATISTIC. I became very scared. The thought of the HIV and AIDS overwhelmed me as I limped my way towards the clinic.

(Mhlongo, 2004, p.140)

The billboard message epitomises the government's endeavour to foster public awareness, even though significant portion of the population, exemplified by Njomane, tends to disregard such initiatives. Njomane's case acquires symbolic proportion precisely because of the profound sense of guilt that overwhelms him as he passes the billboard, already afflicted by a venereal disease. His fearful reaction upon reading the message may be seen as evidence that the government's awareness campaign has achieved a measure of success, insofar as it suggests his future rejection of irresponsible sexual practice. Nevertheless, Njomane's belated realisation also highlights a broader social tragedy: unlike him,

many (black)South Africans are confronted with the devastating consequences of AIDS before recognising that preventative measures were always within their reach. It is at this juncture that Mhlongo's call for awareness assumes critical significance. Through Njomane's experience, Mhlongo appeals to South Africans to embrace responsible sexual behaviour, emphasizing the misfortune of only acknowledging one's negligence after succumbing to its destructive outcomes.

Mhlongo (2007) equally advocates collective awareness as the most effective remedy against the pervasiveness of AIDS. Like Babes, Thek, and Njomane, Zero emerges as the central figure in the author's campaign against the pandemic. He adopts the position of a moralist when he advises the youths, symbolised by Bafana, on the importance of adopting responsible sexual behaviour. This is evident when he tells Bafana that Buju was once his girlfriend, but he ended the relationship when she chose to become a prostitute. Zero further cautions Bafana - who might be tempted to admire girls such as Buju - to be vigilant, since Buju like many other young women today:

[...] behave like those motor mechanics that you see in the Midway scrap yards [...] she's always lying on her back for men to screw her for money. She's a puff and pass, man. You can have her if you're curious to know about what's hiding under those panties, but I'm telling you now that those nice curves of hers are dangerous. She's a social worker. (p.49)

Zero's humorous comparison of Buju's behaviour - and by extension, that of other young women represented through her figure - to the repetitive labour of mechanics functions as a pointed rhetorical strategy that underlines the pervasive threat of the AIDS pandemic. The analogy, which juxtaposes Buju's sexual availability with the image of mechanics lying on their backs daily to repair vehicles, demonstrates the dangers of transactional sexuality in contemporary South Africa. Whereas the mechanic's posture serves a productive and socially constructive purposes,

Buju's posture is depicted as destructive, associated with the commodification of female sexuality and the risks of disease transmission. This representation renders her body a site of potential contagion, emblematic of broad social anxiety about the spread of HIV/AIDS. In this way, Zero emerges less as a mere moralist than as a narrative instrument through which the author advances an awareness campaign. His counsel to Bafana - and, symbolically, all black South African youth more generally - functions as an allegorical critique of sexual irresponsibility, situating Buju as a cautionary figure within the socio-political discourse on health and morality. Rather than advocating individual condemnation, the episode dramatizes the entanglement of gender, sexuality, and disease in the post-apartheid landscape, indicating the urgency of collective awareness as a strategy of resistance against the pandemic.

Mhlongo's position - articulated through Njomane's example as well as through the calls for collective awareness voiced by Babes and Zero - is further reinforced by Thek's incisive critique of the dangerous misconceptions surrounding circumcision. Specifically, she challenges the widespread belief that circumcised men are immune to AIDS and highlights the hazardous practices associated with numerous circumcision schools in the townships. Thek denounces Dworkin's uncritical endorsement of these practices, exposing the short sightedness of his conviction that circumcision provides immunity from the disease. For Thek, both the ritualization of circumcision in these schools and the myth of post-circumcision immunity constitute serious threats, a concern that she emphasizes when she confronts Dworkin:

[...] That old-fashioned tradition of yours is still creeping in the heart of darkness and should be brought to the light of modernity [...] it's doing more harm than good in the community nowadays [...] Look! I mean nowadays there is the question of HIV and AIDS. Just imagine the illiterate traditional doctors, who use



unsterilised razor blade to amputate the  
foreskins of hundreds of people.

(Mhlongo, 2004, p.120)

According to Thek, the black communities persisting in the practice of traditional practices of circumcision must be sensitised to the dangers that now define this age-old custom. The unhygienic conditions and questionable practices in circumcision schools, she argues, have transformed them into potential sites for the transmission of HIV/AIDS. For this reason, she insists that elders who conduct these rites of passage should be stopped, since they are often unaware of the existence of AIDS and its modes of transmission. Thek's position is radical, for she goes as far as proposing the outright abolition of the practice, contending that it is partly responsible for the continued spread of the pandemic in these black communities. This uncompromising view, however, contrasts with Njomane's more pragmatic and reformist approach. Rather than abolishing the practice, Njomane calls for its medical improvement, asserting that "What the bush schools need to improve on is their medical training. The traditional doctors need to be armed with knowledge about the spread of HIV virus" (Mhlongo, 2004, p.121). While Thek dismisses the practice as irredeemably dangerous, Njomane suggests that it can be adapted and aligned with modern medical standards. Taken together, these divergent perspectives appear to reflect Mhlongo's broader concern with reconciling cultural traditions and public health imperatives. Thek embodies a radical critique that problematizes tradition as a site of danger, whereas Njomane articulates a reformist solution that points to state intervention through education and medical training. In this sense, Mhlongo's narrative not only exposes the cultural dimensions of the HIV/AIDS crisis but also implicitly directs the government to engage critically with tradition, balancing the preservation of cultural identity with the urgent need to stem the spread of the disease.

Beyond the issue of the pandemic, Mhlongo is also concerned with poverty and its possible remedies as illustrated through the efforts of Babes and her male friends in assisting the destitute, notably Stomachache. Their gesture of

solidarity can be read as the author's suggestion of a communal response to the widespread poverty afflicting the nation. This perspective becomes particularly evident when Njomane recalls that Stomachache, a week earlier, had confided in Babes that the 16<sup>th</sup> December was his birthday, to which she promised to offer him a present. To honour this promise, as Njomane narrates, "[...] She had asked all her male friends to donate their old clothes, not mentioning that she was going to donate them to Stomachache. Themba, T-man, Mohammed, Dworkin, Dunga and myself all contributed our old rags" (Mhlongo, 2004, p.215). Babes' initiative thus demonstrates the value of collective action in alleviating poverty within her community.

Given the centrality of these characters to the author's social vision, her gesture towards Stomachache may be interpreted as Mhlongo's endorsement of grassroots solidarity as short-term solution to the poverty crisis. In this sense, the example suggests that poverty, while a structural national problem, can be tackled at the communal level through the willingness of ordinary South Africans to mobilise their limited resources in support of the most vulnerable. Such interventions, though modest, point to the necessity of concerted, collective effort at the grassroots as essential complement to broader systemic change. The attitude of this group of friends towards the poor in their community reflects the lesson which K. Anthony Appiah (2003) says he learnt from his father. Appiah in "Citizen of the World" points out that: "the notion of leaving somewhere better than you found it was a larger part of what my father understood by citizenship. It wasn't just a matter of belonging to a community; it was a matter of taking responsibility with that Community for its destiny" (p.189). According to Appiah, belonging to society means one must be ready to sacrifice anything for the betterment of the latter. In this sense, the group of friends towards Stomachache as a poor in their immediate community is a way of assisting the post-apartheid leadership to reconstruct their society.

Bafana's belated self-awareness regarding his failure to exploit and maximise the opportunities available to black youths may be

cited as a closing observation on Mhlongo's position concerning the country's predominant challenges. His case serves as a striking illustration of the problem of mediocrity among school-going black youths in the country. To contextualise the symbolism of Bafana's self-realisation, it is worth noting that he drops out of the University of Cape Town without completing a Law Degree, while continuing to deceive his family and friends into believing otherwise. It is only when his friends, Vee, informs him of her successful graduation from the said institution that he fully grasps the extent of his failure and the disappointment he has caused his family, community, and, by extension, his country:

As I closed the conversation with Vee, a feeling of guilt and regret seized me. Regret over all the lies that I had told Vee and my family, and guilt over how I had missed my opportunity to be the first in my family to have a university degree. While thinking about all this, I smelled the smoke from a zol. When I turned around, I saw that my uncle was smoking next to his stall.

(Mhlongo, 2007, p.59)

Bafana's reaction is analytically significant in the light of Mhlongo's proposed solutions, precisely because it is characterised by regret and guilt. His self-awareness exposes the failure not only of a personal trajectory but also of a generational responsibility, as he recognises that he has let down his family, peers, and even the post-apartheid state that opened avenues for black youths to secure an education and contribute to national reconstruction. The force of realisation is heightened through the juxtaposition with Nyawana's image as a marijuana smoker. This contrast is symbolic: Nyawana embodies the stagnation and decay of township life, while Bafana's missed educational opportunity exposes the fragility of the escape routes made available in the new dispensation. In this regard, Bafana's belated recognition becomes an indictment of his own nonchalance and a commentary on the persistence of mediocrity and wasted potential. The pathos of his condition lies not in individual misfortune but in its similitude with the broader

social condition of black youths unable – or unwilling – to seize the means of transcendence from the township's cycle of misery and hopelessness.

When Bafana's family and friends uncover his deceitful behaviour, his only response is to flee the shame of having disappointed them. His departure to Durban represents, for him, the sole opportunity to begin afresh "[...] I was hoping that Durban was going to offer me a new lease of life [...]" As the train left Germiston Station, at half past seven in the evening [...] Through the window, I stared out into the fading evening light, thinking of my bad fortune, which was unquestionably well deserved" (Mhlongo, 2007, pp.216-17). This expression of self-reproach is significant as it marks his belated recognition of failure and acts as a point of departure in his search for new avenues. Yet these avenues, symbolised by his self-imposed exile, cannot equal the comfort and security that a legitimate university degree in Law would secure, particularly in a society that requires educated black youths for the process of nation-building. Through Bafana's case, Mhlongo emphasizes the need for South Africa's black youths - such as those portrayed in *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) frequenting bars like the Drop Out Bar (pp.114-16) – to take full advantage of the opportunities opened by multiracial democracy.

### **The Collective Commitment of the ANC Political Class**

Mhlongo's (2004; 2007) suggest that the challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa - ranging from the legacy of racial inequality to crime, corruption, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and youth mediocrity – can be mitigated through national consciousness entrenched in individual and collective responsibility. Such awareness, transcending racial and political divisions, must be reinforced by the political will of the ANC-led leadership if the nation-building project is to succeed. According to Mhlongo, the political commitment of the ANC-led leadership together with that of the wider political class, is indispensable for the consolidation of a robust multiracial democracy that can sustain socio-economic and political development in post-apartheid South Africa. Such leadership is not only

tasked with safeguarding fundamental liberties and freedoms, but also with cultivating a culture of responsible citizenship, both within the governing elite and across the broader population. Furthermore, it must establish inclusive channels of dialogue between institutions and citizens in order to enhance accountability and trust in governance. Equally crucial is the obligation to place the welfare of the populace above the self-serving financial interests of influential elites, whose unchecked pursuit of power and wealth threatens to undermine the very foundations of democratic consolidation.

Discussing the government's responsibility to safeguard basic liberties and freedoms, Mhlono (2004) invokes the example of the gay and lesbian protest march to illustrate the need for enforcing the rights of minority groups. He argues that this can best be achieved through strict adherence to the constitutional provisions that guarantee such rights. Upholding these protections would not only affirm the dignity of sexual minorities but also raise broader public awareness of the diverse individual differences that characterise South African society. The collective action embodied in the protest march acts as a symbolic mechanism for holding the government accountable to its constitutional commitments, particularly with respect to a new type of minority whose rights must be respected in the context of a predominantly heterosexual population. More significantly, by taking to the streets of Johannesburg, this minority group is demanding both social recognition from fellow citizens and governmental accountability to the

constitutional order that affirms their right to exist – first as citizens, and secondly as a sexual minority whose identity is enshrined within democratic principles (p.165). In this sense, the protest march becomes not merely a call for respect, but a tangible manifestation of the need for the state to actively uphold and enforce the democratic values that protect the rights and freedoms of all within the nation. This example affirms Charles Taylor's concept of cultural identity which is the cornerstone of minority groups in any nation. As Bhabha (2003) notes, Taylor's perspective on nation-building is particularly relevant in contexts where he emphasizes "on the importance of 'recognition' as a central issue in the creation of a just society" (p. 165). Recognition, in this context, requires minority groups—such as the homosexual community discussed above—to acknowledge their belonging to the wider national community

### Conclusion

In sum, Mhlono underscores the positive role of national consciousness, grounded in individual and collective awareness, in fostering South Africa's socio-political and economic progress. His analysis ultimately offers constructive suggestions to ANC-led government as it strives to consolidate a united, multiracial nation. For Mhlono, the key to overcoming persistent challenges – particularly debates over the strength of South Africa's multiracial democracy – lies in the sustained commitment of all citizens, with the government bearing responsibility for safeguarding the constitutional principles that serve as the foundation of national unity.

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