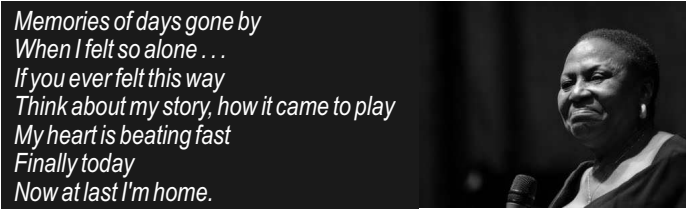


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The Miriam Makeba Story



*Memories of days gone by
When I felt so alone . . .
If you ever felt this way
Think about my story, how it came to play
My heart is beating fast
Finally today
Now at last I'm home.*

THE above lines from her musical composition, *Homeland*, produced in 2000 soon after she had returned home to South Africa, might well be true memorials of Miriam Makeba's life. Most of these "memories of days gone by" Makeba had inscribed in her autobiography: *Makeba: My Story*. In this collaborative biography – Makeba was assisted by one James Hall – she grapples with memories of a painful past as an individual and as a member of a group subordinated and disenfranchised under the apartheid regime.

Miriam Makeba's story emerges as a self-making "therapoetic" process. It is a therapy, not so much "for dealing with psychopathology...as for savoring the aesthetic richness of everyday life" (Kenyon and Randall 2). It is both a spiritual as well as a radical political commitment that entails subversive forms of self-representation. The painful past Makeba remembers entails mental and emotional re-

experiencing of trauma. Memory is a weapon. It is a weapon against forgetfulness of a painful past. When discussing racial conflict and identity in South African novels, Jane Davies reminds us that the desire to forget seems associated with a false belief that forgetting the painful past means recovering from it while, in fact, healing is reached through reflection on and understanding of the past. Makeba urges the traumatized to remember her story. In terms of narrative form, the text presents crucial questions regarding the issues of testimony and witnessing.

There are two distinct narrative points of view in Makeba's text, although the young protagonist's point of view matures as the story unfolds. In Makeba's text, therefore, there is a complex relationship between the narrator and the protagonist. The "I" narrator emerges as both the protagonist who witnessed the events and experiences recalled as well as a detached but an interested party to the testimony about the same events. Sometimes, the narrator as a witness to the testimony of the narrator-as-protagonist, acts as an interpreter, or as a more experienced older sister who assists the "narratee" understand the complex issues that are beyond the comprehension of the relatively naïve and inexperienced protagonist.

In terms of time frame, Makeba's life-story covers the period from 1932 to the late 1980s. The principal narrator explains rather naively how she received her birth certificate when still a youth, "I am given an official document by the white people ... The paper states that I arrived on the Fourth of March, Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-two" (5). At this point in the story, the more reflective and mature observer perspective intervenes to expound on the larger implications of this incident: "There

were no such papers in my mother's time, and no one, not even she, knows her exact age". As if imposing herself as an interpreter for the "narratee," the observer voice explains: "I must tell you how things happened for us, the original South Africans, so you will know how evil of today came to be" (5). And she continues to narrate the principal milestones in the political and social history of South Africa. This inter-textual discourse is suggestive of the sense of estrangement that runs throughout this narrative.

Makeba's self-definition is framed by reference to the mythical symbols of her maternal forebears, heritage and values as a fundamental trope in the construction and representation of the autobiographical self. Secondly, the "maternal principle" emerges in the text as a narrative strategy that is both a vision as well as a model for re-creating a harmonious self in the present and for the future. In this respect, the maternal myth suggests a story about the collective past as part of the individual's story. The framework of "maternal myth of origin" not only provides cultural pathways in the journey to collective identity but also emerges as a transgressive narrative mode. In other words, in Makeba's life-story the *remembered self* is constituted and represented in terms of a gradual transformation that draws on the structure of myth while at the same time re-envisioning collective and individual identities. The claims of self-identity, therefore, derive from and return to the "pre-symbolic maternal power". For example, Makeba's transformation relates to her self-discovery as being the conduit for the *amadlozi* alter-selves she inherits from her mother. In this regard, both texts read like "born-again" or "coming-out" narrative. Being a political exile living abroad, Makeba represents herself as a stranger in a foreign land. The

text is marked by “exilic self-fashioning” or what one would refer to as the “journey motif”. This pertains to self-definition that is constituted and represented in terms of transformation from a state of self-estrangement/alienation to self-awareness. It also relates to physical human mobility across geographic and political space. To be in exile, in a general sense, “means to be out of place, also needing to be rather elsewhere, also not having that 'elsewhere' where one would rather be” (321) as Zygmunt Bauman explains in a favorite article, “The Jew as a Polish writer”. As a metaphor, exile refers to “the pervasive feeling human beings often experience that they do not entirely belong to the sub-lunar world”. Significantly, being a conduit for the *amadlozi* spirits Makeba's “knowing self” is dispossessed by these alter-selves.

Social protest is intertwined with self-definition and transgressive artistic expression. As Claudia Tate observes, social protest is saying that “we do not have to live this way . . . so the question of social protest and art is inseparable for me” (321). Along similar lines, Makeba explains: “My life, my career, every song I sing and every appearance I make, are bound up with the plight of my people. I have been denied my home. We have been denied our land” (1). Myth is therefore, deployed as a defamiliarization technique that subverts racist and patriarchal hegemonic constructions and cognition.

Makeba represents and attributes her complex multi-faceted identity – not least, her musical talents – to her mother's influence and power. Makeba mythologizes her mother by emphasizing her identity as an exiled black woman singer. In other words, she attributes her talent as a singer to the *amadlozi* alter-selves she inherited from her mother. the centrality of the symbolic maternal myth that frames the multiple facets

of her self-definition. There is an interesting triadic positioning evident in the “prologue” of Makeba's text with images drawn from nature. The “call and response” musical style, is quite unmistakable and suggestive of her career:

I look at an ant and I see myself: a native South African, endowed by nature with a strength much greater than my size so that I might cope with the weight of racism that crushes my spirit. I look at a bird and I see myself: a native South African, soaring above the injustices of apartheid on wings of pride, the pride of a beautiful people. I look at a stream and I see myself: a native South African, flowing irresistibly over hard obstacles until they become smooth . . . My life, my career, every song I sing and every appearance I make, are bound up with the plight of my people. (1)

The musicality of these lines is effective in part by the parallelism of the trailing constituents. The symbols and images in Makeba's narrative tend to emphasize the sense of “sight”. This is suggestive of the preponderant form of marginality she addresses. Her “marginality” takes on a “visible” form in terms of physical exile from her home country and in terms of the visible effects of the *amadlozi* spirit possession.

Makeba's self-referential story, reads like a “coming out” narrative. It basically, narrates how she came to the recognition and acceptance that like her mother, she was a conduit for the *amadlozi* alter-selves. These spirits serve as the symbolic “bridge” that connects her to her mother's mythic origins. They manifest themselves principally during her live performances as a musician. In short, Makeba takes stock of her

mother's mystical *amadlozi* spirits in defining her identity as a musician.

The concept of “self” as represented in Makeba's autobiography shows strong linkages to a constellation of ancestral spirits. These spirits manifest themselves in spirit-possession and whoever is under such possession trembles and speaks in tongues. In this respect, an individual temporarily surrenders his/her self-agency and self-awareness and submits to vital forces beyond the realm of self-consciousness. In most African cultures, the view of self and others is formulated as folk models of personal soul, ancestral spirits and kinship in such a way that the actual social structure, with its inherent preferences, is fairly consistent with the ideal, normative pattern of personal responsibilities and social loyalties. An individual “is born into a unilineal descent group or clan, which is the focus of collective identity and social obligations. This collectivity is symbolized by ancestral spirits, who are reincarnated in new born individuals” as Anita Jacobson-Widding noted in a study published in 1983. Hence, apart from the personal soul, each individual has an ancestral soul, a collective alter ego.

Makeba had quite a traumatic childhood. Born in 1932 – the daughter of Caswell Makeba (a Xhosa) and Christina Nomkomndelo (a Swazi) – due to the patriarchal lineage of her ancestry, she considers herself a Xhosa “since I am his daughter”. However, she is quick to caution that in South Africa, “tribal differences are not important . . . the real differences are between blacks and whites and coloreds” (4). From the beginning of the story, her black identity is presented as much more significant than her ethnic identity. This sets the framework for appreciating her identity politics in terms of the bipolar divide of black and white in the context of

the South African apartheid system that classified people along racial lines. Since she was born into a patriarchal social/cultural environment and had to also endure sexist and racist attitudes in South Africa and abroad, one important feature of her self-definition and self-portrayal is protest and resistance against the stifling aspects of sexism and racism. In a certain sense, her spirit possession could be viewed as one of the avenues by which she unwittingly, challenges the excesses of racism and sexism.

The description of the circumstances of her birth foreshadows her marginality and suggests some of the salient aspects of her autobiography. When she was born, Makeba was “so thin and terribly ill” that for two days, “my father prays for me to die” (4). Her father prays for her to die because her “skin is hot” and she is “in such pain that it is painful for others to look at me”(4). Her mother, a trained nurse, did not go to deliver at the hospital since “Doctors are for white people. They are a rare luxury” (3). This suggests the privileged status of the white people. Class and skin pigmentation seem to intersect and define social status. She explains, in a kind of infantile amnesia, “[my mother] has had five children before. Three of them have lived beyond infancy. But this pregnancy has been difficult. For her. For me” (3). The parallelism in “For her. For me” suggests the close bond between mother and daughter from the time of Miriam's birth. But it also suggests a symbolic separation from her mother that begins from the moment of her birth. This is further emphasized: “My mother cuts the cord that joins us . . . I made it. We made it . . . The neighbors come. I may be scrawny, but have I got a voice!” (4). This prefigures her career as a musician. Her “voice”, and by implication, the inherited mother's voice, would be her future weapon for

fighting racism and other stifling forms of oppression. Her struggle is conceived both at the individual and the collective levels. Her mother had been warned not to have another pregnancy since that would endanger her life. Makeba was therefore named “Zenzi” following her grandmother’s characteristic, “Uzenzile” (“This is your own fault”) in reference to Christina’s pregnancy.

Miriam Makeba seems to address a foreign audience that is not quite conversant with certain cultural aspects and institutions of her South African community. For instance, she explains, It is the custom for a child’s African name to comment on the events surrounding his or her birth. My mother, Christina, was born the day her father was commandeered into the British army during the Anglo-Boer War. Her African name, Nomkomndelo, literally means, “the child was born the day the father was commandeered” (4).

When Miriam was barely eight days old, her mother was arrested on charges of brewing and selling an illicit drink, *umqombothi* and sent to jail for six months together with her new born baby. From quite an early age, “forced” exile had thus become a feature of Miriam Makeba’s life. Her father died when she was five years old. Consequently, she was sent to live with her grandmother in the Pretoria neighborhood of Riverside. Her mother went to work as a domestic servant in Johannesburg. Makeba had to quit school at the early age of sixteen to work as a domestic servant in order to make ends meet. At seventeen, she became pregnant by James Kubay, (a Colored young man of Italian and Shangaan parentage). By this time, her mother had been diagnosed as a conduit for the *amadlozi* spirits and taken to Swaziland, her country of birth, in order to undergo the mandatory transformative ritual,

ukuthwasa. This ritual would formally initiate her as an *isangoma* (fortune-teller and healer). Although Makeba's maiden career as a singer began as a church choir member at a tender age, it was when she joined her cousin's son, Zweli, in his new band, the Cuban Brothers, that she was catapulted to the initial limelight as a gifted singer. Her success as a singer led her abroad and landed her a lucrative career in the USA, following "Big Brother", Harry Belafonte's help.

Structurally, the detail about Miriam Makeba's early experiences suggests a symbolic parallel between her mother's developing new talent as an *isangoma* and her own (Miriam's) fledgling talent as a singer. Although the "cord" that connected mother and daughter had long been cut, there seems to be a suggestion that both were fated to be conduits for the *amadlozi* spirits from the time Miriam was born. As the spirits charted out her mother's path as an *isangoma*, it would seem, they similarly charted out Miriam's own path as a singer. Significantly, both mother and daughter, although at different periods, came to recognize their spiritual alter-selves in Swaziland. Hence, quite early in her autobiography, Miriam Makeba suggests the symbolic maternal principle that links the facets of her identity. While pursuing a singing career in the USA, her mother died in 1960. Her attempts to return to South Africa in order to be at the funeral aborted when her South African passport was revoked. This marked the beginning of her life as a political exile. The text concludes with the death of her only child, Bongzi – a kind of misfortune Makeba attributes also to the *amadlozi* spirits.

Being an exile in America, South Africa becomes the "old home". During a trip to East Africa, she reflects, "I stand at the base of Kilimanjaro, near the Kenyan border. I am far away from my homes – my

old home in South Africa that is being denied me, and my new home in America” (110). But America is only a home of compulsory confinement since, as a banned person in South Africa, “If I go back home now, jail awaits me”, she states. One scholar explains that all “travelers are outsiders somewhere.... Travelers can go home, by definition...but one can be an outsider in one's own home town” (Bauman 321). Makeba appears to fit into both categories. Home is a place she cannot return to since the South African regime has banned her, but South Africa as “home” is equally stifling especially for the politically disenfranchised black people. Her identity shifts as her home space also shifts from South Africa to America to Africa, etc.

During the March on Washington in 1968 when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his speech, “I have a dream...”, the event for the exiled Makeba evokes nostalgic reflections about home: “Yes 'I have a dream' too. I would like to see my people free...I would like to go home again” (Makeba 124). Although she considers Africa “home” and every time “I go back to Africa, it is like being reborn”, she is aware that “it is bittersweet, because I cannot really go home – not to the place of my birth and family” (145).

If at the “old home” in South Africa, she ceases to be regarded as singer and “I become something else: a criminal”, America as home does not offer the satisfaction and peace of mind she longs for. Her marriage to her second husband, Sonny Pilay, ends when she chooses to settle in America. Her third marriage to her childhood boyfriend, Hugh Masekela, ends in what she refers to as a “Mexican divorce” as she feels that her success as a musician made him jealous and prone to sulking. Once she parts ways with Harry Belafonte, her mentor, America begins

to appear distant. When Belafonte excludes her from a musical tour of Hawaii, her immediate reaction to her musicians' concerns is, "We're going home". When they inquire where home is, she emphatically states, "Africa". In other words, having been estranged in America, Africa promises a secure home. However, Africa (Guinea) as home, soon presents her with new challenges, especially when Guinea-Bissau unsuccessfully invades Guinea. She reflects at this point: "My home is South Africa. And so I have to ask myself a terrible question: Will I ever find peace in my lifetime? Will I ever go home?" (145). Home is associated with peace of mind. Such a home could only be South Africa and not Guinea. Yet the South Africa of her ancestry is a place she can no longer return to. The maternal home therefore, can only be re-lived nostalgically. Nostalgic evocation of the absent home becomes one of the readily accessible psychological tools she employs in her never ending work of constructing, maintaining and reconstructing her exilic identity.

Although she settles down in Guinea as her new home, her marriage to Stokely Carmichael (President of the SNCC during the black civil rights movements in America), ensures that her home-space becomes mobile as she oscillates between Africa and America. Marriage to Carmichael brings with it its own share of "homelessness". First, some members of the press try to cast her as an appendage of Carmichael but she resists and clings to her own identity: "I am Miriam Makeba first and Mrs. Stokely Carmichael second. I am a singer, not a revolutionary" (159). Secondly, marriage to Stokely leads to her being regarded as a political revolutionary and this exposes her to a lot of police harassment.

Eventually when she decides to leave America for good, it is because

“they want me home, in Africa. Not just Guinea, but other countries have asked me to come and stay. The diplomatic passports they have given me are their way of saying, “Come, be with us” (166). Her settlement in Guinea with Carmichael soon proves far less fulfilling for three reasons: First, she believes that he has yet to adjust to African ways of life. In this regard, she sees African ways of life in terms of a collective identity and psychic social processes:

The spirit of the place must get inside you. There are things that cannot be put into words that rule life in Africa. We respect these things, even if we cannot explain them. We know what our ancestors can do if their will is ignored. So we pay them homage with sacrifice. We know that the spirits of the dead inhabit the *isangoma* in order to help the living.
(173)

Secondly, she comes to the realization that unlike in America where she had been a celebrity, America's many attractions are not found in Guinea. She nevertheless, considers Guinea her home since “what is there are my roots, and I have found that these roots cannot be transplanted”. Thirdly, her settlement in Guinea soon leads to the break-up of her marriage to Carmichael after celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary in 1978: “There comes another woman, a Guinean woman. Stokely does not just have an affair with her”, he brings her “to his wife's house” (204). They eventually divorce.

Miriam's career as a singer provides her with a new sense of self-awareness. Her talent as a singer, in a symbolic sense, provides a

means of reaching “home” or a means of re-connecting with her “absent” mother and collective past. During her performances, she is able to comment on some stifling racist and sexist attitudes and prejudices. In an interview she recalls some places they sang where they were not allowed to join the white musician's union because of the policy rules of South Africa. Thus being a black musician in South Africa was tantamount to being on the margins.

As a young girl, Makeba learned the “healing power” of music not just from her mother but from the Bapedi women singers:

I watch the women dance. Their lively movements are fascinating. The Bapedi shout and laugh and act very happy. This is strange, because these people are even worse off than we are. Is it the music that makes them act like they don't have care in the world, I wonder? It must be. Already I have discovered that music is a type of magic. Music can do all sorts of things.... Music gets deep inside me and starts to shake things up.... The Bapedi stomp and sing out in the field, and there I am, on the edge, singing with them, apart from them but sharing their joy. Who can keep us down as long as we have our music? (15)

Music is viewed as a political weapon that connects all the oppressed people. Its therapeutic effect and political function is collectively and individually experienced. Significantly, she retraces the sources of her talents to some mythical maternal ancestors. It is as a musician that Miriam revises her name. Makeba assumed her new name, “Miriam” and dropped her given name, “Zenzi”, in keeping with the demands of

her new career in music. Once she joins the Manhattan Brothers Band, “the band leader, Nathan Mdlhedlhe suggests the new name, “Miriam,” and soon new handbills and posters are made introducing Miriam Makeba, “*Our Nut Brown Bay*”. With this initial introduction, Miriam soon rises and joins the ranks of her music idol, Dorothy Masuka of the “African Jazz”.

With Hugh Masekela (later husband) and Letta M'Bulu, she performs in the orchestra, *King Kong* (a musical documentary about a black person's life in South Africa). Her stellar performance in *King Kong* soon propels her to launch her own musical group, “The Skylarks”. With Abigale Kubeka at this new outfit, she recorded some of the classic songs that were soon to bolster her career and earn her international fame. Importantly, Makeba portrays this early success and career abroad as predetermined and foretold by her mother's mystical spirits. Long before she could foretell her career, the spirits, she alleges, had foreseen her future: “I still attend to my mother when she is in a trance. I must take care of the needs of the *amadlozi*” (70). She comments that an old spirit friend comes to visit her. “He is Mahlavezulu, the great warrior. This day he speaks about me....The voice comes through my mother. It is stern and firm. “You will leave South Africa. You will go on a long journey, and you will never come back” (70).

Before leaving South Africa she pays homage to her mother, father and the only daughter she is leaving behind: “I slip into the Gallotone to record two songs”. The two songs, “*Good-bye, mother*” and “*Stay well, my people*”, mark the end of Miriam's singing career in South Africa and the beginning of her life in exile. In terms of the narrative project, this turning point is quite symbolic. First, the songs suggest the marriage

between her political activism and singing career. Secondly, her farewell song indicates the complete physical separation from her mother initially suggested at her time of birth by reference to the cutting of the “umbilical cord”. Thirdly, the songs suggest separation from her mother as each embarks in own career in terms of public service. While her mother becomes a full-fledged “*isangoma*” (fortune-teller), Miriam drifts further and further into music as an instrument of political protest and agitation on behalf of her fellow black people. Both mother and daughter are however, aided in their respective careers by the mystical *amadlozi* alter-selves. It is as if the baton has been passed on from mother to daughter.

From now on, Miriam becomes a “motherless daughter” yet still endowed with her mother’s spiritual powers. In order to realize a coherent sense of self, she would from now on have to overcome racism, sexism and other oppressive forms of exclusion on her “journey” towards a symbolic re-union with the same mother. Her mother is first diagnosed as a conduit for the spirits in her home country of origin, Swaziland. Ironically, Miriam is also later diagnosed as such a conduit when on a tour of Swaziland, her mother’s ancestral home. Hence, the physical separation from her mother that begins with Miriam’s travels abroad, ironically, marks the beginning of a spiritual quest for a reunion with her mother. Swaziland emerges as the symbolic mythical space.

Makeba’s self-definition not only privileges the maternal myth of origin, her identity as a singer is also traceable to her mother’s influences. Satisfactory political protest and a coherent sense of self are realized on the concert stage. On the performance stage she can at last “speak out against the racism and murder that makes bloody and foul my

home" (245). It is also on the concert stage that she symbolically re-connects with the mother through the mystical *amadlozi* spirits. The concert stage therefore, provides the opportunity to re-define her identity. It is the important site, the "one place where I am most at home, where there is no exile" (245). The performance stage is the one location where the facets of her identity as a black political activist, a woman, a singer, and political exile intersect and acquire a composite self. It is a composite identity that symbolically is constituted in terms of the maternal principle and a mythical collective past.

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