

THE NOTION OF HOME AND ITS ROLE IN THE IDENTIFICATION
OF THE SELF THROUGH NATIONAL IDENTITY: *SILYAN THE STORK*
AND THE BLACK HOLE OF THE MACEDONIAN
NATIONAL IDENTITY NARRATION

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Abstract: My choice to focus on literature in this paper and use literary work arises from my endeavor to illustrate the idea that the loss of the self and the process of fusion of the individual identity with the community / national values is a narrative that spans in time and that should be viewed through a broader cultural context, and that the tendency to obliterate the individual self plays the socio-cultural role for preserving the values (especially the propagation of authenticity) of the community or nation.

Keywords: home, memory, individual identity, community / national values, narratives

In the context of Macedonian society, identification of the self through national identity has become increasingly important. This implies amalgamation of the individual persona, and at the same time, its definition through the interests of the community. Numerous social phenomena indicate that the representation of national identity has become progressively more

significant, yet the sheer recognition of these occurrences in their contemporary temporal existence does not reveal their relevance nor does it provide elucidation of their social impact. Analysed in the broader context of their construction which requires multiple layer investigation and in-depth research into systems of culture that are indirectly linked to the ideological influence of national identity construction, they undoubtedly lead to understanding and disclosure of subtle social nuances. As part of the system of culture, literature can be viewed and examined from a standpoint and a level that escapes aesthetic theoretization and embodies elements dominated by the socio-political sphere. Therefore, more than often literature can be said to encounter “the nation *as it is written*” (Bhabha, 1990:2) and incorporate the ideology interwoven in the cultural and national identity construction which, on the other hand, is chiefly based on claims for authenticity and longevity. Therefore, those individual manifestations that breach the desired norms set by

the community appear as characters that not only defy, but also betray the nation itself.

My aim to discuss the play *Black Hole* by Goran Stefanovski, a canonical literary work as a product of cultural events and mechanisms stems from the fact that the play incorporates elements that are based on a folk tale about Silyan the Stork as found in the nineteenth century collection by the folk story collector Marko Tsepenkov, a story that exists as part of the Macedonian cultural and literary heritage. The reiteration of various elements of the story serves to demonstrate that they appear as aspects which are still valid and quite common in contemporary Macedonian society. Hence, the play can be viewed as a bridge that connects social and cultural facets that disclose much about the state of mind and identity formation in the context of Macedonian milieu, in particular the tendency of the community to eliminate the self as individual identity construct.

I would like to suggest that one possible interpretation that enables prevalence of the fusion of the individual with national identity is the understanding of the notion of home and its subsistence as a narrative in the provincial mentality as described by Radomir Konstantinovic in his study of the province and provincial frame of mind. Portraying the province as a world outside the world, a world enclosed in itself in which a strong feeling of history and historicity exists, he describes it as a category which furthermore provides fortification and legitimacy of collective values, enabling creation in the belief of the tradition of their longevity. Home, therefore, as synecdoche of the province as a larger spatial category, can be said to represent a paradigm for passivity, traditionalism, sameness, which is also stimulated by the curiosity and desire of

the provincial dweller to have an insight into everything thus enabling absolute exposure of what is marked as private and individual. This, in addition, contributes to the inability of the provincial dweller not only to fulfill his/her own self, but also to develop understanding of what self is.

In this context, the provincial dweller does not exist as someone who recognizes himself/herself as a separate subject, but as someone who is objectified and can be realized only through the collective community that represents and enables them stability, yet at the same time it releases them from personal responsibility. Since collective identity on a nation state level of delineation observed in the frame of the category of home also comprises national identity, the correlation among these few notions and their insight through the functioning of the provincial mentality is very much possible. Thus, national identity can be interpreted as the reflection of the provincial fear from the self and intimacy, from self-understanding as a subject, but also as dread by the openness towards the unknown that exists beyond the provincial home.

Observed as narration of the social space, and here as a synecdoche for "homeland", home in the modern western societies should not avoid the categorization examined through the formulation of Anthony Smith for homeland/fatherland as one of the components that define the nation state as the guardian of national identity. Hence, home becomes a socio - cultural category which exists as a constituting element in the formal definition of the nation state. Home subsists in space as a territory, but also in time which in a linear frame connects not only the past and the present, but also the future, aiming towards freezing the past into one stabilizing point, a centre whose reproduction and

repetitiveness is enabled exactly by controlling the time frame. Therefore, due to the process of legitimizing of the territorial existence in the time-space continuity, the breaching of norms that allow for the home to be the guardian of national memories as well as national identity is becoming a challenge which is very difficult to overcome.

Additionally, since the province establishes a system in which the provincial inhabitant is an object in its monotonous world disgusted by the diversity of other worlds/homes, through the mutual relationship between power and possession of/with the home, it maintains the system of sameness. Given that the borderline between the public and the private is worn away in the province, then home becomes public – everything tends to become a single home, family, nation, i.e. narration. The accomplishment of such acceptable rhetoric of sameness establishes its legitimacy through the continuous temporal and spatial span of the idea for a single home and is furthermore enabled by the social instruments of culture and the power of their narrative strategies to keep and transfer traditions and national memory. On the other hand, we must keep in mind that traditions and memories, according to Hobsbawm, are more than often invented and manipulated, and appear as responses to new situations which take the form of reference to old situations in versions adjusted to modernity which embraces them in its own way so that it later legitimize as unique narrative flow of a culture (Hobsbawm, Ranger, 1984:2). In addition, as Svetlana Boym holds, invented traditions are not creation ex nihilo nor are they a simple act of social construction (Boym, 2001:42), but they are based on the feeling of loss of community or its cohesion, or the feeling of nostalgia. Hence, the

home becomes more cohesive when its stability has been shattered or endangered by individual manifestations that appear as a source of constant and prevailing fear in the provincial settings.

Furthermore, another unavoidable linguistic definition which allows for understanding of provincial interpretation is the etymological meaning of the word “home”. The Macedonian word for home “dom” derives from the Latin term *domus* signifying “domicile” as well as “domesticate”, “dominate” and “dominion”. Anthropological investigations suggest that this construction of the house/home notion is closely related to the representation of domination and ‘produces a symbol of power, rulership and ownership with rights and privileges enabling the dweller to impose through possession and transform through habitation’ (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 1999:6). Furthermore, Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga also argue that while anthropologists have made attempts to make a distinction among the concepts of “house” and “home”, “household” and “family”, ‘the unity (or mutuality) of these concepts is embedded in many European cultural traditions’ (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 1999:5). Moreover, in this analysis the term “house” often signifies or is interchanged with “home” or “homeland” as well:

while “house” implies a physical structure or shelter, “home” defines a place of origin and retreat, such as one’s birthplace or country. [...] “Home,” thus, may take on the meaning of a territory, a physical reference point, a symbol of self, or manifestation of family identity. (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 1999:6)

Therefore, as a category that occupies diminished social space, the notion of house as home appears also as a synecdoche to symbolize the concept of homeland,

and the concept of family may symbolize the nation. The equivalence of these concepts in anthropological terms can be additionally applicable to the connotations that they carry as symbolic representations in folklore and literature. Hence, the relevance of the concepts of “house” and “land” to the analysis of both Stefanovski’s play and the folk story *Silyan: The Stork* in the context of national identity, as well as their interchangeability (as anthropological investigations have shown), can be explored through their classification as identity markers and symbols whose stability contributes to national cohesion. In this regard, the interchangeability of the concept of “home” with “territory” or “homeland” provides a clearer perspective on national identity, since as Anthony Smith argues, homeland is one of the components that define the Western model of the nation-state and national identity, the homeland representing ‘repository of historic memories and associations’ (Smith, 1991:9) that ensures the historicity of the nation. Incorporating the idea of belonging to a non-abstract category like the one of specific territory or dwelling, these concepts allow both the individual and the collective to stay within the boundaries of confined space that nurtures the domestic culture and identity, as well as provide retreat and shelter from intruders, at the same time enabling unity and stability. Additionally, being a product of history, the home(land) acts as temporal paradigm as well, linking past to the present, and additionally incorporating future, and can therefore be considered as an element to which nostalgic mechanisms can be applied. However, the danger of nostalgia according to Boym occurs when it starts reflecting the tendency to confuse the actual home with the imaginary one, thus creating an idea of a delusionary homeland.

In Stefanovski’s *The Black Hole* the idea of home is represented as an actual dwelling, a house which establishes the connection to the national roots standing for the entire homeland. Although in the play we recognize the idea of a remote imaginary land which exists as an opposition to Silyan’s “authentic” home in the source of the play, the folk story *Silyan: The Stork*, the land is employed only as symbolic category with relation to the trauma of the loss of home/identity.

The reconstruction of folklore, that for Stefanovski as he claims in *Prikazni od Diviot Istok* (2005), implies the inescapability of becoming other than a figure from the social mould and his understanding of culture, and thus implicitly of folklore narrative and part of an accurate, strong, authentic story, signify the nostalgic character of his play that craves for something as illusory as the notion of authentic home. Furthermore, Stefanovski views the past cultural narratives embedded in the narrative of home as elements which should not be questioned, as the character of the mother in *The Black Hole* after retelling the folk story about Silyan the Stork confirms: ‘And so it was, God’s truth, my child. You may not believe it, but I surely do, for it was told by my grandfather and great-grandfather, too’ (Stefanovski, 1987:33).

Consequently, this nostalgia that can be traced in the portrayal of the characters’ mentality is paradoxically reproduced in the process of its dismantling; his characters that evoke the ancestors’ wisdom and the patterns of behaviour are reinvented in each new character and with each new story, thus repeatedly reconstructing the existing, in a certain manner, housebound narrative of tradition. His play is also nostalgic not only because it relies on folklore as their constitutive element thus employing characters that are products of something that presumes existence in

the past, but mainly because of their inability to accept that very past due to which they become uneasy about their own existence in the present. Thus, yearning for something different and in constant quest for their identities, they are trapped in some vague crisis-generated nostalgia. In addition, the nostalgic also dwells in his depiction that blurs the line between fact and fiction. Reciprocally, this gives the narrative a touch of truth which further on instigates the creation of the element of authentic home in the identity discourse. As a result, the mechanisms of interexchange between literary narrative and historical facts become active and productive.

Stefanovski's *The Black Hole*, illustrates this fusion of the elements of reality and fiction, both on a narrative and structural level. Basing it on the folk story, Stefanovski employs a character who oscillates between mythical folkloric Silyan and the contemporary Silyan, thus representing a character torn between the past and the present. Both Silyan characters are tormented by feelings of displacement representing a prototype of a nostalgic character that desperately seeks his way home. The folk story deals with a man who distances himself from his family and does not conform to the traditional familial norms and values. He spends most of his time out of the house, lives a bohemian life, and is constantly reprimanded by his parents that such a life only brings misfortune; he could, as it happened to a man once upon a time, turn into a bird and lament for everything he did when it is already too late. He does not heed the warnings, gets bored with his life, and decides to go on a pilgrimage, survives a shipwreck and finds himself in a strange waste land. Being transformed into a stork, he is doomed to spend the whole summer on the chimney of his family's house. No one recognises him, and in his

apathy Silyan regrets that in his human life he ignored his parents' advice and neglected his wife and child. After plenty of vicissitudes, he turns into a human being again and comes back home retelling everyone the unbelievable story.

In Stefanovski's play, Silyan is a postmodern character who loses his job because of a "subversive act" against the communist ideology, becomes disillusioned with society which is decaying (the Macedonian social-realist system of the 1980s), and frequently leaves his home spending the nights with different women. Silyan is that unpretentious intellectual who is embittered with reality and the people around him who are becoming increasingly materialistic and superficial. Accordingly, materialism represents not only the negative aspects of a culture that is treading on the established values, but its superficiality also denies the existence of that "authentic" identity whose narrative is endowed with stories of complexity, depth, morality and intellectuality. Thus, in order to detach himself from the surroundings that he despises, in the play, instead of turning into a stork, Silyan becomes invisible. Symbolising the Macedonian who is caught between his existential need to belong somewhere, but at the same time not wanting to belong to that tainted community, he becomes a representative of the identity that is in crisis, a nation in search of its roots, politically troubled, and economically impoverished. He is the Macedonian who cannot be a part of that certain period of history, yet desperately wants to find his place, that is, his own self. Therefore, in the play, like in the story itself, after having lost his identity he has an irresistible desire to go back and be able to live among his people. Stefanovski best illustrates this nostalgia with Silyan's final cry, which is, in fact, one of the soliloquies from the folk story:

Oh mother of mine! Oh father of mine! Oh my dear little lad and my dear little lass! And you, my dear, dear wife...Will you see me in your dreams in this wasteland, with not so much as a bird singing? Oh, that I had been cut down in my prime, mother, that I had been buried in the churchyard, and you, mother, had come to my grave, to light a candle for me and give alms for the dead! But I am to die here, mother, in this wasteland. Eagles and crows shall feast on my flesh. Oh, why was your curse so dire that I am come to this? Is this bare land the underworld? Ah, woe is me, for I shall see no deliverance, no homecoming. I pray to God to take me back there once again. Oh God, grant my wish and I swear to serve Our Lady three years in the monastery. I beseech Thee, do not take my soul ere I become a man again! (Stefanovski, 1987:52)

Additionally, when Svetle, one of Silyan's lovers in a different scene and context repeats Silyan's words that express his certainty that he hears voices 'like something that was said once before and now comes back again' (Stefanovski, 1987:37) only this time referring to the words uttered by the invisible Silyan, implies Stefanovski's belief in the inevitability of the recurrence of the past and its consequences on the present, like the reappearance of the identity of the mythical Silyan in another context of the Macedonian culture. Moreover, the narrative technique of repetition of different lines in different circumstances evokes the idea of reproduction of culture, and especially the identity which is thus sustained: his characters repeat lines from one another in the same way that he repeats lines from the folk story.

In *The Black Hole* Silyan loses his identity and at the same time becomes estranged from his home, and in

order to regain it he needs to be domesticated again and acquire ownership and control over his identity by transforming his own self - owning his home and, eventually, letting the home own him.

Stefanovski's Silyan also appears as a character that wants to annihilate space as a category that binds him to his past: first he rejects his own home frequently leaving his family behind, and then he is expelled by his wife who tells him to come back (that is, reclaim his real home) when he transforms into another man, a new man (Stefanovski, 1987:18). Thus, Silyan unpossesses his home, and in the end he wants to displace himself in a different space, discarding everything that connects him to his past life:

There'll be no me there any more. No name, no past, no future. No tradition. No morality. I won't owe anybody anything. I won't expect anything. I'll just be. (Stefanovski, 1987:29)

However, after his death or after he becomes invisible, Silyan realizes his dependency on both space and time, especially the need to possess and dominate them. Like Silyan from the folk story, he accepts his ancestors' narrative, yet only after the conversation with his dead mother who has come to guide his way. She tells him the story of Silyan the Stork who is punished for leaving his home and neglecting his family after the fulfillment of his mother's curse:

My son, my son. May you turn into two birds and fly out of this house of ours and go into the fields and sit among the thorn bushes and look for one another and never be able to find yourself. (Stefanovski, 1987:33)

Unlike the mythical Silyan's mother, the mother in Stefanovski's Silyan helps him "find himself" and realize that he, like the mythical Silyan, was lost and needs to return home. Thus, his discourse after his rebirth transforms as well - his cry of denunciation of identity is reversed into a desperate cry for collective identity recognition:

We want a name, a past, a future. Some kind of tradition and morality. We want to owe somebody something. We want to expect something. We want to be. Who is going to pay us special allowances for living away? (Stefanovski, 1987:43)

Analyzing Silyan's character we determine that he is torn between traditional/collective and individual values. He believes to be a victim of the traditional morale and belief that family and community are symbols of unity and stability and that each separation of the self from its home will be punished. The painful feeling of not-belonging and search for personal identity lead him to a desperate struggle with himself and the community he is expected to belong to, leading to loss and fear. What Konstantinovic calls phenomena of closure of the province as fear from the openness of the world in the folk story is manifested through the curses that Silyan cast on him by his family as a result of his bohemian life and his unstoppable desire to see the world, as well as the punishment that follows after he is finally cast out in the open space. In the folk story the punishment is change of the identity category, namely he becomes non-human, a stork lost in a strange land, and in the modern play Silyan becomes an outsider, in a certain way excommunicated from the community.

On a family level in a narrow, and on a socio – political level in a broader context, the home/homeland - fatherland functions on the principle of the reign of the father, the home owner, i.e. the head of the house, or most often the male principle of arch-rule, which is why in provincial environments where the individual is subject to the logic of the family, in the hierarchical structure of domination we expect complete subdual to the principles of the home, i.e. its ruler.

Personified in the character of his father, the home compels Silyan to exist in a fixed spatial point that imposes the inability to escape through the idea that there is no choice, that is, that there should not be any choice, since the home aims at becoming an absolute category. Hence, in a conversation with his father, Silyan reveals his desperate situation and the dominion induced by the rules of the home:

SILYAN: Is this it?

FATHER: There's nothing else.

SILYAN: There must be.

FATHER: You'll get used to it. People get used to having ulcers. Hunchbacks to having humps. (PAUSE. HE SMOKES.) You want to live forever or something?

SILYAN: Yes.

THE FATHER: (MAKES AN OBSCENE GESTURE.) (Stefanovski, 1987:19)

Yet, despite the desire to be released from the possession by his home, to run somewhere out there where he will be no more, without any past, future, tradition, or morality, where he will not owe anybody anything, nor expect anything, where he will just *be*, in the end, Stefanovski's invisible reborn Silyan returns home to his family. Watching the dialogue between his wife and his father and observing his children that

wake up as they sense his presence, he feels as cursed as Silyan the Stork because he cannot join and reunite with them. He has returned home, but received no homecoming, and he ends the play by uttering the monologue taken from the folk story in which like his eponymous character prays to God to take him back home again and help him leave the wasteland.

As a result of the narration this play includes triple storyline: *The Black Hole* represents reiteration of the past by employing the framework of the folk story *Silyan: The Stork* which, on the other hand, is also a narrative based on a past belief. The past in this play thus becomes both a category of space in Boym's sense, and a narrative which reappears in different contexts yet not only a simple repetition of itself, implying that the existence of home and identity is impossible unless the past recurs in the present and endures in the future. This triple storyline, as well as the three-partite delineation: rejection – search – retrieval of his home (yet as a different account), can be understood as a possible solution to the identity crisis, yet does not offer a concrete elucidation of the problematic point of fusion of the individual and collective identity.

Another aspect that requires attention as one of the determinants that point to the principles of functioning of the home is the curiosity of the province. Comprising the penetration of the collective everywhere, it allows absolute openness and insight into everything, or in Konstantinovic's words, it represents the tyranny of the public. The concreteness scares the provincial home since there is always space for individualization. The concrete experience must be transformed into general one to satisfy the criteria for monotony and collective experience. Thus, in the folk story, when the

villagers hear of Silyan's return, they spontaneously form a group rally which turns into a big ear which out of curiosity comes to hear, and perhaps even experience, the retelling of the details of Silyan's different life. In Stefanovski's play there is no collective idea on spreading information in a similar way, however certain characters appear as the embodiment of provincial mentality – his neighbour wants and up to a certain point he succeeds in having insight into the most intimate parts of Silyan's life, and apart from his family, his friends also dare to judge his personal actions and decisions. This constant penetration into everything appears as a traditional version of the Big Ear, the long-established Big Brother that aims to control the self, dominating identity construction in each sphere of personal life.

To sum up, the appearance of the character of Silyan and his family, as well as certain narrative units of the folklore story in contemporary Macedonian literature and their manifestation through time continuum in intersection with the notion of "home" as a spatial determinant that thrives to be fixated into one spot, suggest that the narrative reiteration may exist as a mechanism for sustainability of the idea for authenticity and cohesiveness of the collective identity determination. Appearing as a strategy, i.e. structure which internalizes and nurtures domestic culture, the home exists as a cultural basis for national identity, thus confirming the desire for its continuity and stability. At the same time, it tends to annihilate the individual identity that is, the idea of existence of the self as a unit that threatens to obliterate the common and collective values of a community or nation, interfering with the idea for existence of a single home or homeland.

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