Pede Hollist
*So the Path Does Not Die*

Ruptures of Identity and the exilic experience

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Pede Hollist’s debut novel, *So the Path Does Not Die*, is one of the best novels both in terms of theme and the craft, but especially in terms of the craft, to have come from the West African region in recent times. The novel won the African Literature Association’s Book of The Year—Creative Writing Award for 2014.

In this novel, Hollist critically examines the themes of “Identity,” “Change and Tradition,” “Exile” and “Home,” among others. He takes the familiar theme of exile or un-belonging and not only fashion it into a powerful work of art, but also expands the “territories” of the exilic experience. Exile, in this novel, is both “internal” and “external.” It is no longer merely the banishment from one’s familiar geographical region, but also one’s banishment from the social, cultural, anatomical, and class “norms” of one’s own community. This panoramic conceptualization of exile shakes the reader’s settled opinions about the concept. The novel also presents a compelling analysis through dialogue, of the meaning of “Home” as it relates to exile. Pede Hollist’s novel illustrates Edward Said’s theoretical construction of exile:

*The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons,...
Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.*

The novel is set in places on either side of the Atlantic Ocean---Sierra Leone, America, and Nigeria; but most of the story takes place in Sierra Leone and America. It follows the life of a young child, Finaba, whose name was later clipped to Fina, born in Talaba, a tiny village in the West African country of Sierra Leone. Fina’s journey of growth and discovery, of knowledge of human nature and self, starts in Talaba and continues to Freetown and Koidu; to America (New
York and Maryland); back to Sierra Leone, then to Nigeria and back to Sierra Leone again. These various geographical territories represent territories of the exilic experience for both the protagonist and the other characters.

The prologue foreshadows the mighty tension between Tradition and Change into which the novel’s protagonist, Fina, is thrust early in her life. In the prologue, the protagonist, Kumba Kargbo, is cast in Mythology:

*She was no ordinary child, for she forced her way out of her mother’s Belly, feet first!*...

*Before she even became fully a woman, she spoke of letting darkness Cover a man in Musudugu.*

She was born into a place named Musudugu, a place where only women lived, and where night was never to “cover a man.” Musudugu was a place of harmony protected by the Virgin Girl, daughter of Atala the Supreme. It was the Virgin Girl who protected Musudugu as long as the women in that town continued not to allow night to “cover a man” in their town. It was this place of harmony and peace, protected by adherence to tradition, to which Kumba Kargbo was born.

The epic battle between Tradition and Change is beautifully captured in the dialogue between Kumba and the council leader of Musudugu:

Kumba: *“When you plant a seed, does it stay a seed? No! It grows And if you give it water and manure, does it not grow fast? Why do you want us to stay like seeds?”*

Council leader: *“Pah! A calf cannot stay a calf forever, but if it sucks greedily, it will tear away its mother’s udder… When you do not follow the path, you end up lost in the bush.”*

Such was the threat to Musudugu’s harmony posed by Kumba Kargbo who threatened to kill the traditional path. In her search for reasons why night must never cover a man in Musudugu, Kumba gained knowledge of what “Home” means from Atala, the Supreme:

*Home is not a place, like a village. To be at home means knowing one’s Self and sharing that self with others.*
The above definition of “Home” points to the ambiguity underlying the relationship between personal identity and communal identity. Must the personal self be subsumed to the communal self? What could the nature of this “sharing” of self with others be?

In the novel, the different views held by Nabou and Baramusu (Fina’s mother and grandmother respectively), regarding excision in relation to Fina, is the site for an epic battle. Baramusu represents tradition and is adamantly that Fina undergoes excision. Nabou, who is not a musu ba (initiated woman) herself, represents change and does not think that Fina should undergo excision. When Nabou says to Baramusu, “We do not have to be excised,” the older woman furiously responds:

_allah dando! It may be that you city women are proud to carry that ugly manhood between your legs, but here, that is not our way._

In Talaba, a female becomes a woman only by being excised; otherwise that female is not a part of the community. That female does not belong. Fina’s father, Amadu, snatches her away from the Bundu bush when the initiation just begins. This act of Amadu does not only constitute an abomination, but also the threat of making Fina an exile in her own community of Talaba. Fina is immediately shipped out of Talaba to Freetown to escape “tradition.” Fina loses “home” and it is not clear whether she will ever “go back” to that “home.” This idea of being “exiled” and “going back” to the “same home,” is a recurrent theme right through the novel.

In Freetown, Finaba lives with a Krio family, the Heddles. It is here that her name, Finaba, gets clipped to Fina because it is foreign to the Krio lips. Here, too, Fina is the other; she does not belong. The place of the Heddles is not “home” for Fina. She must find “home.” She thinks college will be “home” for her; she will be accepted for after all it is a place of freedom, of knowledge, of tolerance and truth. A place where she will get an education and one day go to the “land of the smiling dentist”---America.

In Crowther’s College (CC), Fina’s physical appearance or anatomy becomes the cause for exclusion. Fina is a beautiful young girl. Her only quirkness is a slight overbite and the Fula bontit (discoloured teeth) for which she is called “Fina bontit,” and “Fina kaktit,” (Fina with the protruded teeth), the anatomical signposts of Fula stereotyping. It is in Crowther’s College that Fina experiences the fury of ethnic divisions and discrimination based on ethnic considerations. Fina suffers physical, cultural, and psychological banishment on the campus of Crowther’s College.

In America, Fina faces a new world and new challenges. Here, exclusion is not based on being initiated or not; it is not about one’s ethnic identity, but about one’s race. The challenges in America, its materialistic propensity, its brutal individualism, and lack of community warmth force Fina to think about “home.” The author uses dialogue to examine the concept of “home” and whether one ever goes “back home,” or that “home” is a creation of the exile. Her alien-ness forces her to involve in a relationship with a drug addict just so she can get a Green Card. There are layers of un-belonging in America that shock Fina. After her experience with the drug addict,
she falls in love with Cammy, a Trinidadian medical doctor who loves her. But their wedding was thwarted at the last minute, like Fina’s initiation ceremony.

Fina goes back to Sierra Leone and finds herself working in a camp helping children traumatized by a horrendous and brutal war. The novel ends with Cammy resolved to join Fina in Sierra Leone. So the death of one path is the birth of another.

Pede Hollist’s craft is masterful. Besides the effective use of the prologue to foreshadow the novel’s tensions and the epilogue to resolve such tensions, Hollist effectively employs devices such as proverbs, metaphors, similes, symbolism, evocative description, among others, to enhance the effect of his message. Hollist’s power of description allows people, places and emotions to come alive to the reader.

*So the Path Does Not Die* is a book worth reading. Settled opinions on certain issues in the reader’s mind become unsettled when the reader leaves the pages of this book.