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Processing Identity as an Existential Quest in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

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Abstract:

Drawing on Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (IPT), this article reads Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* as a study of immigrant selfhood under pressure. Viewed through a transnational lens, the novel presents African immigrant identity in U.S. metropolitan space as unstable, relational and continually negotiated. Sepha Stephano's experience of displacement, racialization and economic precarity intensifies identity threat and compels him to develop everyday coping practices to sustain selfhood amidst a state of flux. By contextualising transnational simultaneity through Breakwell's Identity Process Theory, this article reframes Sepha's ordinary actions as forms of existential identity negotiation operating across intrapsychic, interpersonal and intergroup levels. It further demonstrates that coping strategies that protect identity in the short term may also narrow social horizons and deepen isolation over time.

Keywords: Identity Process Theory; Transnational migration; Identity threat; Coping strategies; Racialization.

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Introduction:

Dinaw Mengestu is an Ethiopian-born American novelist whose fiction repeatedly returns to migration, memory and the negotiation of belonging across unequal worlds. His debut novel, *The Beautiful Things Heaven Bears* (2007), reflects these concerns. The novel resists the familiar arrival script often expected of migration narratives. Rather than depicting immigration as a completed movement from hardships to belonging, the novel presents immigrant identity as an unfinished process shaped by memory, social recognition and unequal power relations. Sepha Stephanos flees Ethiopia after his father is violently killed during the Red Terror, making his migration more than a pursuit for better opportunities. It becomes an existential quest shaped by fear, loss and the need for survival. In this context, "existential quest" refers to Sepha's ongoing effort to preserve a livable and coherent sense of self amid fear, instability and displacement.

As an Ethiopian immigrant in Washington, D.C., Sepha occupies a metropolitan space in which displacement continues beyond the act of crossing borders. His sense of self is repeatedly unsettled by racialized perceptions, economic vulnerability and changing neighbourhood power relations, which shape how he is seen, who he is allowed to become and where he can belong. His confession, "How was I supposed to live in America when I had never left Ethiopia?" captures the novel's central tension (Mengestu 140). Although Sepha's body has arrived in America, his self remains bound to Ethiopia through unfinished histories, unresolved attachments and unequal structures of recognition that refuse closure.

This article argues that Mengestu's novel as a daily existential quest in which Sepha's quiet routines, strategic distance and periodic withdrawals operate as coping strategies shaped by structural pressures that continually threaten his subjectivity. His everyday practices, including storekeeping routines, friendship rituals, guarded intimacy, protective invisibility and

nostalgic narration seek to keep identity liveable within a social world that repeatedly places it under pressure. Sepha's reflection captures this emotional condition: "With our menial jobs and cramped apartment, it's impossible not to want to look back sometimes and pretend there was once a better world, one where husbands were faithful, children were obedient, and life was easy and wonderful" (Mengestu 108). This statement reflects Sepha's life as an immigrant, as he longs for an idealized past or an imagined world where hardships does not exit. For Sepha, identity thus becomes an effort to preserve a coherent self amid destabilizing pressures.

Reading the novel through the lens of transnational migration and Identity Process Theory (IPT) clarifies the pressure under which Sepha lives. Transnationalism shows that Sepha's life unfolds across multiple temporalities and attachments: "home" persists as memory, grief and imagined return, while "host" space remains a demanding site of adaptation that never fully guarantees recognition. IPT sharpens this reading by tracing how identity threats become psychologically consequential and how coping emerges as a patterned response to them. The central claim of this study is that Sepha's immigrant identity emerges as a fragile balancing act in which he attempts to protect continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, belonging and psychological coherence through ways of coping that provide short-term relief but often deepen long-term isolation.

Literature Review:

Recent scholarship increasingly reads Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* as a novel of durational, everyday negotiation rather than a linear arrival narrative. In "Identity Crisis in Diaspora: A Study of Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*," Awan et al. read Sepha's experience through the lens of identity crisis, highlighting how immigration unsettles self-definition and intensifies the pressures of diasporic life.

The novel has also been studied from the perspective of spatial, border and power arrangements that structure diasporic life. In "Décalage and Borderscaping in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*," Sbiri explores how bordering practices shape Black diasporic formation. The study highlights the ways in which space and belonging are negotiated within transnational contexts. Ndaka extends this spatial emphasis in "Spatial Encounters: African Migrant Masculinities and Gendered Geographies of Power in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*," surveying the gendered dimensions of migration experience and the positioning of African masculinities within the global modernity; he highlights the novel's portrayal of migrant masculinities in degrees of "fugitivity and entrapment" within an ideologically inflected American space. Ogbazi draws on postcolonial theory and Freud's concept of melancholia in "Stuck Between Two Worlds," arguing that "otherness, marginality and liminality" limit the ability to realise aspirations in the country of migration (Ogbazi 123). Read together, Sbiri, Ndaka and Ogbazi show that Sepha's narrowed life is not merely a matter of temperament; rather, it is produced by metropolitan structures that regulate movement, visibility and recognition.

Critical work on Sepha's interior practices further suggest that inwardness functions as strategy rather than mere retreat. In "The Reading Self in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Thing That Heaven Bears*," Mirmotahari argues Sepha's engagement with literary works, alongside his everyday observations, becomes a means of ordering memory and navigating the complexities of diasporic life. Poudyal's "Agency and Identity Crisis in Diasporic Experience" complements this focus by situating Sepha's identity strain within trauma and socio-economic vulnerability, emphasizing how constraint shapes his capacity to act. Rordal's "On a Perpetual State of Becoming" similarly links transnationality to precarity and argues that the novel resists stable endpoints and disrupts linear journey toward a final American identity. Building on these insights, this article shifts the question from what Sepha lacks to what he does: how ordinary

routines, strategic distances, selective affiliations, protective invisibility and nostalgic narration operate as identity-preserving practices when recognition remains unstable.

Theoretical Framework:

Transnational migration contests the assimilationist fantasy of a clean break. Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc define transnational migration as the process by which immigrants "forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (48). Levitt and Glick Schiller refine this argument by distinguishing "ways of being" from "ways of belonging," noting that migrants may participate in transnational social fields through everyday practices even without overt public identity performance(1011). This distinction is crucial for reading Sepha, whose Ethiopian attachments are often embedded in memory, routine and narration rather than overt political and communal expression. Sepha's confession that he "never really left Ethiopia" signals a rupture in continuity: the past remains active and unresolved, complicating the possibility of feeling at home in the present (Mengestu 140).

Identity Process Theory (IPT) was established by Glynis Breakwell and later developed by social psychologists such as Rusi Jaspal, Vivian Vignoles and Marco Cinnirella. In this framework, identity is understood not as a fixed structure but as "a set of processes operating in a principled manner," which is visible in Sepha's case (Breakwell, *Coping* 23–25). Two major processes are central here: assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. Assimilation refers to the absorption of new components into identity. Accommodation refers to the adjustment of the identity structure so that new elements can be integrated, while evaluation refers to the meanings and values attached to those elements. These processes are guided by four principles: self-esteem, or the desire to be evaluated positively; distinctiveness, or the desire to be unique; continuity, or the need for a consistent sense of self; and self-efficacy, that

is striving to be competent (Breakwell, *Coping* 23–25). Breakwell argues that identities are "fluid, dynamic and responsive to its social context" (Breakwell, *Coping* 19).The theory therefore helps explain how social value systems, representation and power relations become identity relevant pressures, shaping both the formation of selfhood and the coping strategies individuals adopt under threat.

Identity threats occur when these principles cannot be adequately satisfied, prompting individuals to develop coping strategies in response. Breakwell defines coping as "any activity, in thought or deed," directed toward diminishing threat (Breakwell, *Coping* 78). Coping may be understood as operating across three interconnected levels. At the intrapsychic level, it involves cognitive and affective strategies; at the interpersonal level, it takes shape through relationships and social interactions; and at the intergroup level, it responds to social representations, group boundaries and unequal power relations. Vignoles and colleagues further show that identity construction is shaped by multiple motives, including belonging and meaning (Vignoles et al. 308-33). Jaspal and Cinnirella extended the Identity Process Theory through the "psychological coherence principle," which refers to the need to perceive interconnected identities as compatible and coherent (849-70).

Methodology:

This article undertakes a close reading of key sites and scenes: (1) the store as a recurring site of precarity and threat to self-efficacy; (2) Sepha's early dependence on Uncle Berhane as a formative context for self-efficacy; (3)Sepha's friendship rituals with Joseph and Kenneth as instances of bounded belonging; (4) racialized misrecognition and scripting of Blackness as threats to self-esteem and distinctiveness; (5) neighborhood boundary-making discourse, gentrification and Sepha' interactions with Mrs. Davis function as sites through which he negotiate belonging and everyday recognition; and (6) Sepha's fragile intimacies with

Judith and Naomi in which recognition, belonging and psychological coherence are tested. Throughout the novel Sepha's everyday practices can be read as coping strategies of routinization, withdrawal, selective affiliation, protective invisibility, nostalgia, imagined return, cautious engagement and revaluation. The analysis below tracks how these strategies protect identity in the short term while often narrowing social horizons and intensifying isolation over time.

Precarity and Racialised Legibility:

Sepha's early years in America are marked by dependence on his Uncle Berhane. Sepha recalls that he, "he hardly remember[s] making any decisions" for himself until "three years later," when he realises he cannot continue living that way (Mengestu 142). Sepha's delayed ability to make decisions signals a prolonged threat to self- efficacy before the store becomes the place where his agency is tested again. Living in an African American neighbourhood, Sepha finds himself isolated because of his immigrant status and different cultural difference. He confesses, "I rarely left the apartment, nor did I want a person, building, or time of day, would have been deceitful, and so I avoided making eye contact with people I didn't know, and tried to deny myself even the simplest pleasure." (Mengestu 126). This condition threatens his self-esteem. Physically, he withdraws from the outside world, while emotionally, his separation from the past intensifies his inward isolation.

Sepha begins his life in Washington with an aspirational narrative of upward mobility. He recalls investing "two thousand dollars of borrowed money" in the store with the hope that it might expand: "perhaps my store could become a deli, and in becoming a deli, a restaurant and in becoming a restaurant, a place that I could sit back and look upon proudly" (Mengestu 3). Yet the novel quickly reveals how such trajectories are interrupted by lived temporality. Sepha's description of time, wherein he claims that "it seems as if time stands completely

still… and is resumed only by my return," reveals his sense of a suspended life (Mengestu 17). The store, therefore, becomes more than a business setting; it becomes a symbolic space where Sepha measures the gap between aspiration and survival.

The store remains the novel's most consistent site of self-efficacy threat because it materializes precarity and renders agency measurable in humiliating ways. Sepha's early admission, "Since January, I've had exactly three deli orders," reduces his life to a bleak numerical measure of failure (Mengestu 3). In terms of IPT, this detail signals a threat to self-efficacy, the need to feel capable of acting effectively and shaping one's circumstances. Sepha's experience repeatedly suggests the opposite: his labour produces little change, his business remains stagnant, and his aspirations appear increasingly beyond his control. Work does not reliably produce stability and outcomes remain uncertain. Sepha's primary coping response is routinization. Routine produces controllable order when external structures deny reliable agency. He repeats predictable tasks, limits exposure to interactions and uses the store as a micro-world of constrained control. Yet the more Sepha relies on routine, the more his world contracts. The store becomes both a refuge and a trap.

If precarity undermines self-efficacy, the racialised city threatens self-esteem and distinctiveness through misrecognition. Sepha rightly observes: Here in Logan Circle, though, I didn't have to be anything greater than what I already was. I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had long since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mine to begin with. As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no more harm. (Mengestu 41).

In IPT terms, imposed categorisation threatens self-esteem by devaluing the self and threatens distinctiveness by collapsing Sepha into pre-existing social scripts. Sepha's coping here is protective invisibility. He tries to persist unnoticed, treating anonymity as a shield against humiliating recognition, even as that shield withdraws him from belonging. Protective invisibility is therefore double-edged: it reduces the pain of hostile visibility, but it also makes fuller participation in public life harder to imagine.

Belonging under Pressure:

Against these wider pressures, Sepha's friendships with Joseph and Kenneth become the novel's clearer instance of interpersonal coping. Joseph from Congo and Kenneth from Kenya, like Sepha, live in the long aftermath of displacement and their companionship offers a small, repeatable structure of recognition when public recognition fails. Through their repeated meetings at the shop, Joseph and Kenneth create an interpersonal space in which Sepha appears as a person with history, voice and memory rather than as someone confined to racial or immigrant categories. In IPT terms, this is interpersonal coping: a controlled social space where belonging can be minimally satisfied.

At the same time, their care often takes practical form, as they urge Sepha toward regularity and engagement with the store in an effort to protect continuity and self-efficacy by resisting his drift into deeper withdrawal. The three men see the opening of the store as "a departure from frustrating, underpaying jobs and unrealized ambitions," while Joseph views it as marking "the beginning" of their "new lives" (Mengestu 144–45). Sepha also reveals that he opened the store after Kenneth advised him to be his "own boss," describing it as "the only way" of getting "anywhere in this country" (Mengestu 143). Their friendship, therefore, functions as a local form of repair within an environment where belonging remains unstable.

Levitt and Glick Schiller's distinction between "ways of being" and "ways of belonging" helps clarify the limit of this friendship: one may practice affiliation through ordinary rituals without securing stable public membership (Levitt and Glick Schiller 1011). This is what bounded belonging names. Joseph and Kenneth offer Sepha a provisional membership created through repetition, shared memory, humour and mutual complaint. Yet that membership remains bounded because it does not dissolve the racial and economic pressures of the wider world. The circle protects him , but it cannot fully transform the conditions that make protection necessary.

Sepha's interaction with his African American neighbour, Mrs. Davis, further reveals his desire to connect with the community in which he lives. As an immigrant from Ethiopia, he does not want to remain a stranger within his own neighbourhood. He notes, "Beside Naomi, she was the only person I knew who called me Mr. Stephanos. There was something friendly and yet mocking in the way she said it, something akin to the way you can occasionally hear a mother refer to her son as a 'big boy'" (Mengestu 177). Mrs. Davis's mode of address gives Sepha a measure of comfort. Her presence suggests that belonging in the neighbourhood is negotiated through small, everyday forms of recognition rather than through secure acceptance. In this sense, Mrs. Davis represents another fragile site at which Sepha tests whether everyday forms of recognition can include him without fully absorbing him into, or excluding him from, the social world around him.

The Active Past and Psychological Coherence:

The threat to continuity appears most starkly in Sepha's confession that he never really left Ethiopia (Mengestu 140). His past persists as unresolved grief and obligation, interrupting the hostland's demand for adjustment. This immobility is intensified by loss. Left alone behind the counter, he is struck by "a sudden, terrible and frightening realization that everything I had

cared for and loved was either lost or living on without me"(Mengestu 40). The past, therefore, does not remain behind him as a completed chapter; it continues to exert active pressure on the present.

Jaspal and Cinnirella's psychological coherence principle clarifies why Sepha's life is not merely sad but internally strained. Coherence refers to the motivation to reconcile potentially incompatible identity demands so that the self remains intelligible and stable. (Jaspal and Cinnirella 849–70). Sepha repeatedly faces competing demands: he must be visible enough to survive yet guarded enough to remain safe; he longs for belonging yet relies on self-protection; he is pressed to adapt to America yet remains bound to Ethiopia; and he desires intimacy yet fears misrecognition. These contradictions emerge sharply in the novel's attention to roles and performance. When Sepha says they have "run out of roles to play," he reveals how belonging can depend on fragile scripts that eventually collapse (Mengestu 137). Roles are not superficial masks; they are coping performances. Sepha manages how others read him in different roles, as a quiet shopkeeper, detached observer, ironic friend, cautious neighbour and this role management aims to maintain psychological coherence.

Judith and Naomi introduce the possibility of connection beyond Sepha's bounded immigrant circle. Judith is a white history professor who moves into Logan Circle with her daughter Naomi, an eleven-year-old of mixed race. Their visits to the store create an alternative relational scene in which others can read Sepha differently, less as a generic "poor Black" figure and more as a singular person. Judith's repeated presence in Sepha's store offers an opening toward a broader and less humiliating mode of recognition, while Naomi's curiosity and warmth offer him a form of acceptance. Crucially, Naomi's presence also reconfigures Sepha's act of reading. The store had functioned as a private enclosure where books protected him from exposure, but Naomi draws reading outward, turning it into a shared medium. Reading becomes not only intrapsychic coping but also a tentative interpersonal bridge.

Near the end of the novel, Sepha's sudden visit to his uncle's apartment and his reading through the old papers in his uncle's absence lead him into a meditative reflection on his seventeen years in America. The eviction notice he receives from the house owner also forces him re-evaluate his life: "Narrative. Perhaps that's the word that I'm looking for. Where is the grand narrative of my life? The one I could spread out and read for signs and clues as to what to expect next. It seems to have run out if such a thing is possible. It's harder to admit that perhaps it had never been there at all." (Mengestu 146). Here, Sepha articulates continuity threat explicitly: the self's struggle to integrate past, present and future into a coherent story. In IPT terms, re-evaluation can restore self-esteem and coherence by rejecting hostile value systems. However, Mengestu refuses consolation. The proverb, "a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone" keeps the cost of simultaneity visible (Mengestu 228). The ending is not triumphant synthesis but sober recognition: coherence can be partially stabilized, yet the social conditions that generate identity threat remain intact.

Conclusion:

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears is best read as a narrative of identity under existential threat. Rather than treating Sepha as merely stalled or passive, this article has shown that the novel's quiet textures of routine, distance, withdrawal, guarded intimacy and nostalgia function as survival practices shaped by unequal recognition in a racialized metropolis. Bringing transnational migration into conversation with Identity Process Theory clarifies why the past persists as an active attachment and what that persistence does to identity when continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, belonging and psychological coherence face repeated pressure. Across the novel's key scenes, Sepha's coping responses operate across intrapsychic, interpersonal and intergroup levels, showing that strategies that protect identity in the short term can narrow social horizons and deepen isolation over time. Hence, the novel can be read as an existential quest in which neither assimilation nor triumphant belonging

prevails. What remains instead is the ongoing labour of preserving a coherent self amid persistent insecurity, misrecognition and loss. Further research could apply this combined transnational-IPT framework to other contemporary diasporic novels to compare how the existential pressures of everyday precarity shape coping among different migrant subjects.

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