



The Struggle for Identity in the Post-colonial African Novel

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Abstract

This study aimed at documenting the struggle of identity in the post-colonial African novel and the implicated liaison between African colonial literature and the African identity. Most of the literary genres in the continent during post-colonialism were revolving around the social and political gap which came to advent after colonizers who endeavored to obliterate the African cultures, values, traditions and social aspects. The study could also shed light on the tremendous efforts made by African novelists throughout the continents in showing the African identity through their writings moreover to the most outstanding literary products which could appropriately bring the international recognition to the African literary work. The researcher portrayed the way Africans were leading their lives during the pre-colonialism and the unstultified remarkable changes during post-colonialism.

Keywords: post-colonialism, identity, novelists, values.

المستخلص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى توثيق الكفاح من أجل الهوية في الرواية الإفريقية وربط ذلك بالأدب الإفريقي لفترة ما بعد الاستعمار في أفريقيا، إذ كانت معظم الأجناس الأدبية في غضون سني ما بعد الاستعمار تتمحور حول الفراغ السياسي والاجتماعي الذي ظهر بعد زهاب المستعمر من البلدان الإفريقية والذي كان يسعى سعياً حثيثاً لنسخ الثقافات، القيم، التقاليد وكل معالم المجتمع الإفريقي كما سلطت الدراسة الضوء على الجهود الكبيرة المبذولة من قبل الروائيين الإفريقيين من كل أرجاء القارة في إبراز الهوية الإفريقية من خلال كتاباتهم فضلاً عن المنتج الأدبي الإفريقي البارز والذي بدوره قام بتقديم الأدب الإفريقي للعالم بصورة لائقة. عمد الباحث لتصوير مظاهر حياة المجتمعات الإفريقية ما قبل الاستعمار والتغيرات الملحوظة بعد مجيء المستعمر

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الاستعمار، الهوية، الروائيون، القيم.

Introduction

People of the black continent(Africa) have been degraded by most of the world population as they believe that Africans have been leading a jungle life which submits to no rules, principles or regulations. Such a claim would throw a heavy burden on the shoulders of the enlightened Africans particularly those who have been undertaken literary movements. Before the forth coming of the colonizers there were the oral forms of literature which were used to teach the juveniles the values and principles of their clan or tribe. They were mainly made to reinforce bravery which could equip them with a sense and

tendency of protecting their properties and lands.

Literature is a method of showing people's traditions and identities as writers tend to convey different aspects related to their societies. Therefore, African writers in post colonialism tended to show African identity through their writings to mitigate the impact of the western cultures on the African people which would almost obligate the African traditions, heritage and social life in general. So the various African literary genres were to rectify the breakup of the African nations after the departure of the Whiteman who evacuated the continent leaving it to be self-determined.



Cultures and identities of a particular nations are maintained by their literary men so long as the keep spreading their cultures and identities everywhere throughout the world and receiving the other's life styles displaying them to their people through their comparative writings. (Ngugi, 1993. P21) argued that”
..., *cultures that stay in total isolation from others can shrivel, dry up or wither away. Cultures under total domination from others can be crippled, deformed, or else die. Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy.*”

African people have been degraded by most of the world population as they believe that Africans have been leading a jungle life which submits to no rules, principles or regulations. Such a claim would throw a heavy burden on the shoulders of the enlightened Africans particularly those who have been undertaken literary movements. Before the forth coming of the colonizers there were the oral forms of literature which were used to teach the juveniles the values and principles of their clan or tribe. They were mainly made to reinforce bravery which could equip them with a sense and tendency of protecting their properties and lands. However, new narrative styles of African novels were used after colonization to highlight the long lasting struggle of cultures and identities between Africa and the rest of the continents.

Writers are usually concerned with their countries identities so they have the sense that they are entitled to lead national and international struggles for the sake of their identities (Brumfit and Carter, 1986) reported that, “writers

introduce a fundamental structure of beliefs and interests which reflect the particular culture or section of society into which they were born and in which they grew up”.

This research is intended to indulge into the struggle for identity in post-colonial African novel which was stressed by African writers in post-colonialism in all the literary genres made by the writers of the continent.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at:

1. Shedding light on the struggle for the identity in the African post-colonial novel.
2. Showing how writers are concerned with maintaining the identities of their societies.
3. Displaying the impact of colonization on the African novel.

Overview of the literature Review

The section in question reviews the literature of the field being surveyed. Some comparisons, contrasts, analyses, and analogies will be made to show the struggle for identity in the African post-colonial novel mentioned in the above highlighted contexts. In addition, the struggle for identity will be the preoccupation of this study with the reference to various points as paradoxical point.

The very African novels which will be used here may reveal areas of differences and disconcordance between the sheer western cultures and the African ones in terms of ideology and contexts. This study in return will endeavor to find logical interpretations for the difficulties that African novelists face in handling their identities through writing. The investigated materials will include the following points:



-What is identity?

Identity is one of the meanings which are firmly deepened in human minds; it makes them confident and proud when dealing with people of the other cultures and races, so writers devote a great deal of their precious time to highlight their cultures and identities as a components of their writings and ideologies.

Identity is defined by (Richards. 1987.198) as “ *the distinguishing character or personality of an individual*”

- components of identity

Identity distinguishes the folks of a particular society from other folks, so there should be various components which get together to form identity, some of which could be:

- **Culture**

Culture includes a set of various social and human values. Hence, the broader sense of the word “culture” covers all the aspects of human life and their interaction with the surrounding environment.(Richards, 1987: 179) argued that “*culture is a total set of beliefs, attitudes, costumes, behavior and social habits of the members of a particular society.*” However, culture represents the source on which a writer bases his writing theory among the members of his community; otherwise, it will be discordant, understandable or unpalatable. The writer’s culture, emotions, doctrines, costumes and traditions can obviously be used in his/ her writing which seems strange and abnormal on the part of others who are not from the same culture. An Australian poet whose verses revolve around his homeland with its geographical features, historical events, social values, and

environmental variables would relatively be indecipherable for most of non-natives of Australia. Another example would be a person from Africa who lives in the savannah or equatorial territories, might not fully appreciate a poem composed in the Northern Polar, Europe or Eastern Asia. Unstultifiably, that due to the mismatch and discordance between cultures and circumference environments in which people develop their linguistic repertoire and literary competence so that it is taken for granted.

- **Heritage**

It was succinctly defined as “the practices or characteristics that are passed down through the years, from one generation to the next.”(Richards.1987) This definition brings it home that the societies which are adherent to their heritage uphold the generational concatenation of their nations. African communities by nature are very nostalgic, so the memories of their ancestors are out there so long as they live. On the basis of this novelists, poets, short story writers, haikist, and dramatist throughout the continent play a major role in dealing with the heritage of the continent in an assortment of literary genres.

- **Values**

They are “the virtues that guide us to take into account the human element when we interact with other human beings” Value(nd).GrainesdePaix. Jul.15.URL.

Human values are for example, respect, acceptance, consideration, appreciation, listening, openness, affection, empathy and love towards other human beings.



It is with those human values that one becomes truly able to put in practice his/ her ethical values, such as justice, integrity, refusal of violence, and ban to kill even in a crisis situation. The above mentioned point depicts that a person's values can reveal something of his own identity.

- Identity in post-colonialism literature

A novel is defined as work of art in which a writer depicts his ideas and thoughts in more details, it has a complex plot and more than one theme or **novel**, nearly always an extended fictional prose * NARRATIVE, although some novels are very short, some are non-fictional, some have been written in verse, and some do not even tell a story. Such exceptions help to indicate that the novel as a literary *GENRE is itself exceptional: it disregards the constraints that govern other literary forms, and acknowledges no obligatory structure, style, or subject-matter. Thriving on this openness and flexibility, the novel has become the most important literary genre of the modern age. (Baldick.1992.173)

A novel is an extended literary work which gives a novelist ample opportunities to send out the aspect of his/ her identity via his/ her novel so, novelist tend to portray the cultures and identities of their nations as a genuine part of their work of art. A novel is also a narrative genre which holds a great deal of the world cultural issues to be discussed and compared to various societies.

Post-colonial novelists could hold the ground after the departure of the Whiteman leaving a great space behind him as he was controlling over the

African nations in terms of rules, culture, social aspects, political relationships and family life in general. Novelists like Alan Paton wrote *CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY* trying to contract the vast space left by the Whiteman; he pointed out the breakup of the African societies in post colonialism and how the struggle of cultures and identity could influence the inhabitants of the continent negatively. **Urban migration.** "All roads lead to Johannesburg," the omniscient narrator of *Cry, the Beloved Country* frequently observes (Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, p. 10). The historical truth of this declaration is borne out by the mass migration of black and white South Africans from rural to urban areas in the 1930s and 1940s. Black farmers, bound by such legislation as the Natives Land Act (1913)—which prohibited them from purchasing or leasing land from non-Africans outside of the colonial reserves set aside for blacks—were most affected by drought and soil erosion. Unlike white farmers, black farmers had no access to the advanced technology and irrigation techniques that would Revitalize their land and make it productive again: By the 1920s, some of [the reserve land] was already carrying such a heavy concentration of people and livestock that the original vegetation was disappearing, streams and waterholes were drying up, and soil erosion was spreading. In the years that followed, the African reserves continued to deteriorate. The novel could hold a comparison portraying the life of the African people before and after colonialism as well as during the colonialism. (Moss.2000. 57)



It could be said that when the Whiteman left Africa there was an assortment of identity loss which could be a thought provoking idea for the writers of the continent, so it was used as a main theme on the part of many black novelists.

- African identity and African novelists

The African writer has been nurtured in a society in which the sense of community is very strong. A cardinal point for understanding the African view of humankind is the belief that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 108-9). Literature in Africa has been and remains an affirmation of faith in one's cultural ideals. Social cohesiveness is very important to Africans because they believe that "the earliest act of civilization was...the establishment of a cooperative, interactive, human community." Kunene adds:

The idea of integrating the artist's vision within a broad social experience becomes a normal and natural process that does not require rules for its application. Both the philosophic and artistic worlds fuse to produce a discipline that aims at affirming the social purpose of all expressions of human life. In short, the ideal of social solidarity is projected (1982, xvi).

Modern African literature is very socialized. This literature is different from that which focuses on the individual. It is this communal spirit which informs the characterization and social analysis in Soyinka's *Interpreters*, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. In each of these novels a group, rather than an individual, is emphasized. There is no single protagonist that overwhelms other characters. For instance, in *Anthills of the Savannah* it is the fate of the nation of

Kangan that is at stake in the lives of Sam, Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and Beatrice Okoh. Similarly in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the community can be said to be a protagonist struggling against Western intruders to maintain its cultural practices. The focus on society with its attendant social criticism in modern African literature is in the African tradition. African writers, in asserting their cultural identity, condemn Western intervention as disruptive of the growth and development of African culture through colonialism. Cultural habits and practices change and the writers generally feel that there were and still are sufficient mechanisms and ample latitude for internal changes in African cultural life. After all, culture is dynamic. As Achebe demonstrates in *Things Fall Apart*, such practices as the throwing away of twins, the osu caste system, human sacrifice and exiling a person for inadvertent murder were already being questioned from within by Obierika and others. Africa did not need colonialists and the Christian religion to change. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the dramatist's viewpoint suggests that the practice of the king's horseman accompanying him to the spirit world by ritual suicide was already failing and needed no colonial intervention to stop. The colonial officer's intervention resulted in a greater tragedy for the society in the waste of two lives in the place of one. Mazisi Kunene, the South African poet and scholar, has cautioned in *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* against any group assuming ethical and moral superiority over others because of its material and technological advantages (1982, xi).



Material and technological advancement and ethical and moral advancement do not necessarily go together and are in fact antithetical in the experience of both Africa and Europe. As cultural standard-bearers of their people, African writers use literature to assert cultural independence.

Novelist wouldn't stop leading controversy points in the course of identity loss, therefore, African novelists have so far been playing a major part in discussing the issue of their societies' identities which is distorted by the Whiteman as they claim, so post-colonial novel was directed to a great extent towards this issue raising various perspectives and viewpoints.

The severe struggle between colonizers and the African people was quite obvious in Achebe's things fall apart in which the white man made tremendous effort to transit people of Uomofia from paganism to Christianity and change their identity to hold the ground for more stable western sovereignty in Africa. (Middleton.2002. 5) clarified that when Christian missionaries began arriving in Africa in greater numbers in the early 1800s, they made a serious effort to educate local populations. The goal of the early missionary schools was to produce literate individuals to take over minor positions in local churches and become functioning church members. Hence, that was regarded as a threshold for the colonizers in metamorphosing the African identity to control the Africans smoothly and conveniently.

Languages of the African novels and the issue of identity

The debate concerning which language(s) African writers should use in addressing their literary works has brought in two arguments, although a carefully examination shows that both are not logically far from each other. The first argument is the one presented by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and his followers, who suggest that for a literature to be called "African literature" should, no doubt, be written in indigenous African languages. They oppose the fact that foreign languages (like English, French, Arabic and Portuguese, among many others) should not be acceptable languages used in portraying African lifestyles and peculiarities. The second group is led by Chinua Achebe and his followers who are mainly in favour of adopted foreign languages. To them, the colonial languages provide the possible solution in addressing African literature since, on one hand, there are so many diverse ethnic languages in Africa, and on the other, they can cover a larger range of population than the undeveloped African languages. There is no doubt that Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the most front runner of this group. Other writers and critics are Abiola Irele, Charles Nnolim, Obiajunwa Wali, Gabriel Ruhumbika and Mazisi Kunene, among many others. As we illustrated earlier, their major argument is that for African literature to be authentic and worth the name "African literature", it must be written in one of the African languages (Menang, 2001). They suggest that there is need to make one or two African languages official, and from which it would be used in writing a literature meant for African people.



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Should African literature be written in African languages? Or should it be written about the people of Africans in a language other than their own? These are two pertinent questions that Ngugi wa Thiong'o tries to address. He suggests that African languages should be the only medium through which African writers can address the ways of life of their fellow Africans; the languages provide direct access to the rich traditions of Africa and its people. To him, writing in one's native language (L1) is for identification and a way of fighting against the imperialist powers that can defend their cultural and national heritage. African languages are the sources through which African writers can struggle against wider imperialist domination by the colonisers. In 1986, Ngugi has suggested that African writers should always write in their L1, avoiding the old imposed colonial languages of English, French, Arabic and Portuguese, among others. According to him, although his earlier works (novels and plays) have been heavily written in English, yet he has switched to writing mostly in Gikuyu, a Kenyan language, in order to reach his target audience. He claims that decolonisation is possible only by liberating oneself from the power of the imperialist languages; it is the only way of reclaiming the cultural identity of a nation: "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngugi, 1972, p. 290). According to the source, the bullet used by the colonisers is a means

of physical subjugation, whereas the used of the imposed colonial languages in depicting African literature is another means of spiritual subjugation. In order to communicate to wider audience if there is need for it, Ngugi suggests that translation is possible since it ought to be the equalitarian mode of interaction between and among languages, and writing in his L1 would pass his message well to his common people. Also, it would show that he is no longer subjected to any colonial subjugation. He argues that writing in European languages is only for the educated elite class; and as such, literature written in any language other than African languages is not quality to be recognised as African literature. Rather, such literature should be considered as Afro-European literature. That is, the writers have created another hybrid tradition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European (literature written by Africans in European languages), reaching only a limited audience, not a wider one (Ngugi, 1990).

Ngugi celebrates the merits of African national languages, arguing that he would like to see African writers writing in such a literature that would reflect the real rhythms of African child's spoken expression. He actually places African languages at the top of a hierarchy of languages used in depicting literature for the African writers. Apart from the communicating function of a language, Ngugi argues that writing in one's L1 would help to express and carry the cultural heritage of the people, becoming a storehouse of its images, wisdom, experience and history.



In his words, language is power: it draws the writer closer to his people. In other words, Ngugi is of the opinion that Europeans force their languages on Africa, and meanwhile, African writers have blindly accepted the offer, enriching another culture (European culture) with their own experience, thereby ignorantly disregarding theirs. He believes that writing in any of the European languages by some African writers is another means of spiritual subjugation. He therefore, encourages African writers to be proactive and take a responsibility onto themselves to counter such imperialism. And he delves into writing in his L1 (Gikuyu) because it is the only way to move away from European domination: "I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenya language, an African language, is a part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 28). Ngugi challenges such African writers writing in European or imposed colonial languages to abandon such act.

Conclusion

The study could significantly shed light on the struggle for identity in the African post-colonial novel and the role played by novelists in highlighting the issue in question. However, post-colonial novelists in Africa found it crucial and pivotal to explicate the ongoing struggle for identity which was led by the African politicians and inhabitants in most countries of the continent in search of filling the space which was left by colonizers after leaving the continent. Hence, African people found it hard to take office replacing the Whiteman as they try to reform their societies in terms of almost everything. Thereby, novelists

endeavored to stress the issue of identity using various western languages instead of their local ones as the western languages were well known rather than theirs and helpful in propagating their thoughts.

To sum up, the researcher could appropriately uncover the issue in question in the African post-colonial novel displaying a few novels which could tackle the topic of the African identity throughout the continent. On the basis of that African literary movements during post-colonialism were oriented towards the decisive struggle between their local societies and the European outsiders who were intrusively making effort to propagate their doctrines, values and style of life for more exploration in the continent.

Recommendations

- African novelists are relatively responsible for securing the African identity through their novels.
- African researchers should significantly document the issue of African identity found in the African post-colonial novel.
- African novelists should use some of their major languages to propagate their cultures and local values to confirm their identity and upgrade their societies.
- Language is one of the effective means of securing nations identity.
- One or two widely spoken African languages should be standardised and adopted as a medium of instruction in all the African schools until majority would have access to those languages. If that is done, and especially used in writing African literature, it will help to define the real identity of African literature. Such languages would serve as central identity, promoting Africans at the international level.



- Novelists can use modern narrative styles to highlight the African identity for the new generations in such a way that may keep up with the technological breakthrough and the cyberspace of the modern world.

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