

Quest for Self Affirmation in the Postcolonial Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the aftermath of decolonization; the effects of colonialism on the social, economical, cultural and traditional life of the once colonized countries and their quest for self identity in the postcolonial period. Though the colonized nations got freedom, yet their minds are still overpowered by the superiority of their colonizers. Distorted image of their own self was imprinted on their minds and globally as well, which required to be given a proper shape. The postcolonial writers played an important role in setting out the strategies to liberate their minds and let them realize and recognize their own self. This quest for identity further develop them as a self determined native who could redefine his self and articulate his experiences/history in his own words. Post colonial literature depicts the different perspectives of the native writers of the third world or the liberated nations which can relocate their place in the world.

Key words: Postcolonial, quest, identity, redefine, self.

Colonial period can be deeply marked as a period of uprooting the colonized countries from their culture and tradition. Postcolonial period finds the voices of these once colonized people to seek their identity, place and culture back and make it marked as their indigenous identity in this globalized world. The impact of this urge to get the recognition of the self is clearly visible in the postcolonial writings of these colonized countries specifically. Postcolonial writings in English have been discussed by different names like commonwealth literature, world fiction, international or trans-cultural writing. Postcolonial mainly includes the literature written in those countries which were once colonies of British, as well as, some branches of British writing, most remarkably Black literature. These trans-cultural writings have expression in multitude; on the other hand, we have single-voiced authority of colonial writing. Literature not only reflects the political and social developments of any time in particular but also explains people's experiences at various levels. It has been observed that the literary interpretations distinguish colonial and anti-colonial experiences.

To get authority over a territory or a nation, political or economic control was not sufficient, command over the minds was essential for which colonizers attacked on the tradition and cultural identity of the nations, which were further crucially dismantled politically, economically, socially and culturally. Postcolonial writings mainly novels, stories, plays and poems and to some extent essays, letters and travelogues worked as a tool to reassure the rich past and the original self through which the lost identity and dignity might be reasserted. It is through narratives that the long silence of these oppressed broke out and they start articulating their own emotions and feelings.

The postcolonial writers participated in this quest for self affirmation through their writings and gave their contribution in this work of giving proper shape to distorted image of their own people. Postcolonial critical discourse has developed continuous dialogue and analytical studies of colonial and postcolonial writings. The publication of Edward Said's '*Orientalism*'(1978) raised new questions and

placed the western writers in the dock. On the other hand a new group emerged; among them Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*(1998), Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory* (1998), Dennis Walder's *Post Colonial Literatures in English*(1998), John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism*(2000) and Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial literature*(1995) are remarkably notable. Thus more critical studies in the texts and contexts are being produced to elaborate the definitions set in the colonial and postcolonial period. The historical background of these postcolonial writers and the narratives they had read of either writer had helped them to reinvent their selves and have shaped the way to understand their history. This relation between a writer and his history can be well defined in the words of Ngugi, "The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with 'the thing that has been', a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history"(Thiongo, 1972, p.47)[1]. Writers like Ngugi believed that African writers have been haunted by the past because instead of clarifying their notions, the historical narratives put forth the opacity of the past, thus they find themselves in a puzzled state of mind.

Leela Gandhi had pointed out that "the emergence of anti-colonial and 'independent' nation-States after colonialism is frequently accompanied by a desire to forget the colonial past"(Gandhi, 1998, p.4)[2]. But at the same time Leela Gandhi admits that these "newly emergent postcolonial nation-States are often deluded and unsuccessful in their attempts to disown the burden of their colonial inheritance" (Gandhi, 1998, p.4)[3]. Postcolonial writers passionately revisit, critically interrogate and interpretatively analyse the colonial past through their narratives. They rethink and reinvestigate the past from their own perspectives to invent their self and portray it. This portrayal explains the position of identity formation and position of the struggle over identity formation. The true representation required a manifestation in a way so that the colonists could understand the retaliation of the colonized. For this colonized first took hold of the language of the colonists to represent themselves. The language which was taught forcefully to them by the colonists themselves became a prime and strong means of representation. Initially

the colonized were taught the language of the colonists under the so called process of civilizing the barbarous natives, later these natives used the very same as a tool against their masters. Similarly these natives were forced to accept their master's religion in the colonial period but later they not only gave up their religion but also rejected their Christian names; Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe are the good examples of it who changed their names from James Ngugi and Albert Achebe respectively.

In the postcolonial narratives; fictional and non-fictional, natives' urge to obtain their lost culture and identity could be seen with great intensity. They asserted the value of their culture and tradition with prominent conviction. Gerard says, "...Like most technologically under developed cultures, African cultures are based on values that are fundamentally societal"(Gerard,1970, p.35)[4]. Ngugi delineated his profound faith in his tradition and culture. In 'River Between', it is through the character of Muthoni that Ngugi voiced the need to affirm the self to the Africans so that they should come out of the shackles of the cultural colonialism. Being a victim of the imperialism, Africans have long ceased to assert their true self, imprudently and incautiously they had been trying to follow the standards and expectations of their colonial masters; the white missionaries. The worst thing that can happen to a man is the loss of integrity and respectability as a human being and it is this integrity and respectability that they must regain. It is not astonishing that Joshua has lost the respect of his two daughters: Muthoni and Nyambura, who have rebelled against him by denouncing all that he stood for including his converted religious faith. Ngugi himself asserts, "A religion that took no account of people's way of life was useless. It would not satisfy; it would not be a living experience, a source of life and vitality. It would only maim a man's soul, making him fanatically cling to whatever promised security, otherwise he would be lost"(Thiongo,1972,p.162-63)[5].

Nyambura, Joshua's elder daughter initially refused the proposal of Waiyaki as she knew that her father would not consider their relationship because Waiyaki

was not a Christian and she could not reject her father's faith. But finally she too rebel against the rigid norms of her father and affirms her unique individuality. Ngugi states, "Nyambura never rebelled before; not with deliberation. This was her first act of rebellion and she knew that she was beyond the grasp of Joshua... the call of the inner voice that urged her on, the call of the land beyond Joshua's conflicting hand, was too strong"(River Between,p.157)[6]

Waiyaki's love strengthens the weak Nyambura and enlightens her path of meaningful life where she could assert herself. She boldly steps into a new world of self reliance, leaving behind the dark and meaningless world of his father. She realizes the warmth of Waiyaki's world which symbolizes the tribal faith. On the other hand, Waiyaki also moves out of the rigidness of his faith of not marrying an uncircumcised girl and accepts Nyambura with open heart and great affection. Thus Ngugi presents a socio-cultural picture of Kenya and raised questions of identities which are broken or deformed due to the cultural colonialism but he also portrays the strong characters of Muthoni, Waiyaki and later Nyambura who show a ray of hope and projects the faith and value of his culture. He exhibits a deep self awareness about inheriting a tradition. Ngugi believes in what Boehmer remarks: "to win self-determination they had to develop ways of dealing with negation, self-alienation, and internal hatred produced by colonialist rule"(Boehmer, 2005,p.162)[7] Ngugi has significantly developed such attitude in Muthoni, Nyambura and Waiyaki. They were able to apprehend the enduring strength and insight of their own communities, they had withstood invasion and occupation, thus they would be able to reject the colonizers' presence and change their lives.

Radical national activities spread intensely throughout the world in the second half of the twentieth century. Outrageous and violent oppositions at different levels among the colonies could be seen. The passionate urge and struggle for freedom was felt in the decolonizing countries; especially in African countries like Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and in the French colony of Algeria. In political sense this indicated towards national independence of the colonized countries, while in the economic

realm it pointed out the shift of control over productive resources. The need of belligerent confrontation, absolute opposition and aggressive freedom struggle was felt by the leaders and writers intensely. Active resistance on all fronts; economic, political, social and cultural was required. Intellectuals and writers played a vital role in the process. Boehmer rightly comments: “Unlike earlier Negritude attempts to reverse racist stereotypes, Fanon argued, the struggle against the colonizer should take as its aims not only complete national autonomy but the transformation of social and political consciousness. The colonized had to ‘insult’ and ‘vomit up’ the white man’s values”(Boehmer,2005, p.175)[8].

Writers of the colonized countries took up the call to include literature and language as weapon and a moving spirit in the nationalist struggle. Anti colonial resistance became a rallying cry and a focal subject of texts of many great writers like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, V.S. Naipaul, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Jomo Kenyatta and many others. They believe that the role of culture was to help transform social life, and in turn, social transformation had the potential to generate a marginalized culture. One of these promising writers Ngugi describes the psychological dissonance and alienation experienced by colonized as the most damaging effects of colonization. Colonizers had built a false impression on the simple and innocent minds of the colonized people that high culture and civilized ways could come only from colonizers. Neither the official language, nor the literature of the colonizer experienced as part of a colonial education, corresponded to the native experience. Ngugi felt sorry that Kenyans have forgotten even their geographical facts and only remember about things of far, as an old man says about Munira in *Petals of Blood*: “These children ... you have too much of foreigner’s maneno maneno in your head.” (PB,p.11) When the old man asked about the harvest to Munira he simply answered that he was not a farmer. Studying Dickens, colonial school children might feel more confident about describing the fog of London than their own weather, though they had never experienced that fog. This is how the native children were getting away from their own land. Ngugi comments that colonial subjects were expected to

evaluate by the world according to the way it was seen by the Europeans, and so were presented a 'distorted image' of them. Karega in 'Petals of Blood' depicts the alienation and dissociation of the native students from their land and culture due to the education system of European interest at Siriana. Students craved to be taught African literature, African history, for they wanted to know themselves better. They didn't want themselves to be presented in an alien land and alien environment like white snow, spring flowers fluttering by on icy lake. They wanted the education system of their own where their own teachers would teach them. They denounced the perfect system, the knightly order of masters and menials. But the situation in the post colonial period was nothing better than colonial time. The newspaper took up this aspect of crises but only to criticize the students who retaliated against the system. According to them students had no right to choose what they ought to be taught and who was fit to teach them. Thus motive of Ngugi was truly acclaimed in the novel like 'Petals of Blood' which was a political novel in a wider sense. Ngugi himself asserts the purpose of writing this novel in an interview: "My position here is very simple. As I said earlier I believe that people have a right to know how much wealth is produced in their country, who controls it and who benefits...I also believe that no Kenyan should be able to sleep peacefully for as long as he knows that wealth of the country is still controlled by foreign countries...in other words, I believe in a national economy free from any foreign domination or free from imperialist control." (Ngugi interviewed by Magina Magina, in *African Report*, Feb., 1997, pp.30-31)[9]

To sum up, in the post colonial literature the post colonial writers specifically focus on the presentation of their culture, tradition, pre colonial truths to the people in a way to restore and redefine their self and regain their confidence to reconstruct their identity as an individual to find a place globally. Writers and scholars took up the challenge to help the colonized people to come out of the troubled and confused state of mind and reassure and reaffirm their true identification.

References:

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