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Things fall apart: A liminal identity: Thematic approach of identity crisis

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze the novel, *Things Fall Apart* as a liminal Identity: Thematic approach of Identity Crisis from the perspective of Postcolonial Literature. The study analyzes the plot development and the thematic aspects of the novel on one level. On the other level the paper analyzes how the facts related to the colonial aspects of Africa and the impact of colonialism are embedded in this fiction. Therefore, it is a comparative study of Post-colonialism and Post-Colonial Literature. A brief introduction to Postcolonial literature is given at the outset. The indication of the word 'post-colonialism' along with the origin and development of the postcolonial theories and studies are critically examined. The research evaluates the thematic aspect of postcolonial literature, identity crisis with special reference to liminal identity. It also critically analyses the various representative authors like Rushdie, Achebe, Ondaatje, Fanon, Derek Walcott, and J. M. Coetzee in addition to some female writers like Jamaica Kincaid, Isabelle Allende and Eavan Boland. Furthermore, it also briefly examines the political history of colonization and the impact of colonialism on the literature produced during post-colonial period. The research introduces Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart*, from the point of his personal and historical background in order to compare the content and the context of his writing. Thus, the study reveals that the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is a revelation of Identity Crisis.

Keywords: Post-colonialism; Post-Colonial Literature; Identity; Hybridity; Orientalism; Ethnicity; African Culture and Tradition; Literary Theory

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe was born in the *Igbo* town of *Ogidi* in Eastern Nigeria on November 16, 1930. His father was an instructor in Christian catechism for the church missionary society. Nigeria was a British colony during Achebe's early years. His parents even named him Albert. Achebe himself chose his name when he was in college. Achebe attended the church missionary society's school. At about eight, he began learning English. And after graduating at eighteen, he was accepted to study medicine at the new university college at Ibadan. At university college, Achebe switched his studies to liberal arts, including history, religion and English. His first published story appeared in the student publication the university herald.

In 1972 he was appointed to a three-year visiting professorship at the University of Massachusetts at the Amherst. And in 1975, to a one- year visiting professorship at the university of Connecticut. Achebe received many awards from academic and cultural institution around the world. *Things Fall Apart* was his first novel published in 1958 and in 1959 it won the Margaret Wrong Memorial Prize. The following year, after the publication of its sequel, *No Longer at Ease*, he was awarded the Nigerian National Trophy for literature.

Achebe has used his education as a mean by which to strengthen, not demean, his cultural heritage; a medium to forge a new identity of his own. Achebe made use of his writings to re-unite and re-build his community. His writings in general long for going back to the original identity of Africans.

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Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is one of the most influential novels of post-colonialism. This novel explores the interaction between traditional African society and British colonizers. It portrays the conflict between the colonizers and the colonized. In this novel the main character Okonkwo struggles to understand a new culture and cope up with the changes received from British control. He witnesses the dissolution of the traditional Igbo culture with the introduction of Christian missionaries. The protagonist is raised in the non-western culture and is exposed to the confusion of dealing with a western culture that does not recognize his own tradition, culture, language, values and identity. Though it is a fiction, this novel examines various situations occurred after the post-independence West Africa. The changes that happened after the arrival of British settlers have affected the life of the Africans. They are divided. They have lost their originality and have adapted the British culture. Therefore, the protagonist goes through an identity crisis which leads to his tragic fall. Thus, the story represents the African society that has lost its own identity and goes through a tragic fall.

1.1. Research Problem

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe has been prescribed for the University Students in the module called, Commonwealth Literature. However, it does not seem to be merely a fiction. Though it is a tragedy of the protagonist, Okonkwo, certain historical facts and information are embedded in the novel and gives a historical touch. This tragic story is the reflection of Post-Colonial Africa. The novel is the portrayal of how Africa loses its original identity in terms of language, tradition and culture and also it expresses the longingness for its own identity. Therefore, a question arises whether the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is a search for true identity.

1.2. Problem Statement

The purpose of this research is to evaluate thematically whether the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is merely a fiction or reflecting the True Identity Crisis of Post-Colonialism.

1.3. Review of Literature

The term 'post-colonialism' is widely referring to the representation of race, ethnicity, culture, tradition and human identity in the modern era, mostly after many colonized countries got their independence. It is connected with imperialism from the moment of colonization until 21st century;

"The word imperialism derives from the Latin word, *imperium*, which has numerous meanings including power, authority, command, dominion, realm and empire" (Habib, 737)

Most parts of the world were under the control of European countries. The British Empire consisted of 'more than a quarter of all the territory on the surface of the earth: one in four people was a subject of Queen Victoria.' It is the literature and the art produced in the countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigeria and Senegal after their independence, called as post-colonial literature. Edward Said's prominent book *Orientalism* is an assessment of Western representation of Eastern culture under the label 'post-colonial studies.

Some of the most famous post-colonial writers are Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Michael Ondaatje, Franz Fanon, Derek Walcott, J. M. Coetzee, Li-Young Li, Jamaica Kincaid, Isabelle Allende, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Eeva Bolland etc. The four names appear again and again as thinkers who have shaped post-colonial theory: Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Mostly their literary works were representing interactions between the colonizer and the colonized. Though all these writers had different nationalities and social backgrounds, they could all create their own distinction in producing wonderful works of literature of which many would certainly come under the label post-colonial literature.

J.M.Coetzee writes on vigorous anti-imperialist attitudes as a white writer living in South Africa for the apartheid. In most of his novels, he represented his own alienation from his fellow Africans. *The life and times of Michael K* is an award-winning novel set in Cape Town with a protagonist Michael K who is a gardener. His novels are allegorical and accentuating the everlasting nature of human vindictiveness.

Frantz Fanon was another notable writer in post-colonial literature, who was interested in the emotional effects of colonization and racism on blacks, his most known work *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961 and became a leading critic of colonial power and influenced aggressive revolution. In another instant, he used his personal experiences in his book *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) to show relationship between colonized and colonizer in terms of psychology in observing emotional damage to both colonized and colonizer.

Michael Ondaatje is a novelist, critic and poet born in Sri Lanka and moved to London with his mother. He is best known for his Booker prize winning novel *The English Patient* which features the interactions of characters of various nationalities during the last days of World War II. These novel surveys lots of post-colonial themes such as intersections between national and individual identity which caused in consciousness.

Salman Rushdie is an Indian post-colonial writer whose most successful and Booker prize winning novel is *Midnight's Children* which got him an international reputation. This novel intertwines personal events into the history of India. The narrator in this novel is Saleem Sinai. Author used many devices like magic Realism, Hindu story telling etc.

Ngugu wa Thilongo's *Decolonizing the Mind* is a kind of multiple type genre and it describes various traditions of his people. It also presents how British education system tries to destroy the local culture and its language Gikuyu.

Jamaica Kincaid's famous novel *A Small Place* is one of the post-colonial discourses with which she draws on her personal experience of living in British colony of Antigua. She expresses her contempt for the British ways for colonized. In this novel, she focuses on the English Educational system which attempted to turn natives into English. Further she points out that the native people like to adopt the worst of foreign culture and pay no attention to the best.

Edwidge Danticat from Haiti is the writer of the novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Her novel presents many themes like migration, sexuality and gender. In this novel, the protagonist Sophie struggles to get an identity out of desperate cultures and languages such as French, English to adapt to American ways after she reaches Brooklyn, New York.

The question of identity is the most controversial issue in post-colonial time and literature and it can be regarded the most important because of its crisis exist in all post-colonial communities. Their original identity was destroyed by the colonizers and given a new hybrid identity. The followings are some of the extracts from the literature.

"I who am poisoned with the blood of both,

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?"

– Derek Walcott, *A Far Cry from Africa*

The poem, *A Far Cry from Africa* focuses on the racial and cultural tensions arising from colonial occupation of that continent and the subsequent dilemma for the speaker, Walcott himself, a black poet. He is caught between love of the English language, with which he expresses himself poetically, and the ancestral blood ties of his African family, who have been oppressed by the very people whose native language he needs, to survive as a poet. In these lines, he expresses poisonous nature of his identity because his father was British and his mother was Black. He says that his blood is poisoned by the mixture of African and British blood. And this confused status, he is in dilemma to take a side.

"I went to Roman Catholic School,

A mugging Jew among the wolves.

I grew in terror of the strong

But undernourished Hindus lads,

Their prepositions always wrong,

Repelled me by passivity...."

-Nissim Ezekiel, *Background Casually*

In his poem, *Background Casually*, Nizzim Ezekiel expresses his multi-identity as being in India. He portrays his confused identity in the above stanza. This stanza expresses the theme of alienation. He feels alienated in his own native land. However, this poem is a search for identity.

"... Philosophy, Poverty and Poetry,

three companions shared my basement room...."

-Nissim Ezekiel, *Background Casually*

Nissim Ezekiel, in search for his identity went to London for his studies, however, he felt lonely there. He could not find his identity. Rather, philosophy, poverty and poetry became his companion. In the search for his identity, he found alienation everywhere.

“Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that *Umuofia* would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messenger’s escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’ - Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Ch. 24

These lines occur in the last chapter *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo has killed one of the European messengers, and the others fled away with the help of the people from the tribe. He knows that the *Umuofia* would not follow him and go to war against the English. Eventually, the old man, Okonkwo is completely broken in spirit and feels extremely guilty as he begins to hear voices in his head. Finally realizing the hopeless situation, Okonkwo commits suicide. The story ends with the tragic fall of the protagonist. It shows that the Africans have lost their identity and they are not able to regain their own identity.

Post-colonial theorists also have contributed a lot in terms of identity crisis of post-colonialism. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* Critiques Western representation of the East as irrational, anti-western, primitive and dishonest. According to Said, Orientalism is an ideology born of the colonizers’ desire to know their subjects to control them in a better manner. Said argues,

“To write about the Arab oriental world ... is to write with the authority of a nation ...

with the unquestioning certainty of absolute truth backed by absolute force.”

Another post-colonial theorist, Homi Bhabha illustrates his conception of ‘cultural difference’ in terms of what he describes as ‘the language metaphor’, which represents cultures in semiotic terms as functioning and assigning value in the same was that systems of language provide meaning’ (Gilbert, 124)

His theory also investigates ideas of ‘Hybridity’ and ‘Ambivalence’ to construct national and cultural identities. In his famous books *Nation and Narration* (19190) and *The Location of Culture* (1994) used psychoanalysis and semiotics to explore the spaces created by dominant social formations in the works of Morrison and Gordimer.

Thus, the issue of identity crisis was existed in post-colonial Africa and it was reflected in post-colonialism and post-colonial literature. The novel, *Things Fall Apart* was set in the context of post-colonial Africa and this novel reflected the reality of post-colonial African society. The theories of post-colonialism discuss a lot about the issue of identity in African society. Post-colonial literature also dealt with the issue of identity in African Society. Therefore, this research is a comparative study of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* as a piece of post-colonial literature and post-colonialism.

2. Research Methodology

This is highly academic research. The applied research methodology is a critical review of literature and a comparative study of two different disciplines: Literature and Post-Colonialism.

- The theories and the features of post-colonialism were analyzed.
- The literature produced during the post-colonial period was under study.
- The novel *Things Fall Apart* was under critical study and the thematic aspect (identity crisis) of the novel was extracted.
- The extracted information was compared with the history of post-colonialism.
- After the comparative analysis the conclusion was reached.
- In the light of findings, recommended remedies were made.

3. Research Findings

Mostly Achebe's writings express his own quest for identity. As a novelist, he represents African society to the world. He made use of his gift of writing to bring out the facts in the form of fiction. He is a revolutionary writer who questions

indirectly colonialism and its impact on Africa. Apparently, his writings are the pictures of reality of African society. He tries to expose the struggle that the African society experienced during the colonial and post-colonial eras. He expressed the freedom struggle that the African people went through under the clutches of British colonizers. He wrote how the Africans slowly began to lose everything after the arrival of Colonizers and how the Colonizers eventually changed the Identity of the native Africans in the name of civilization. The novel *Things Fall Apart* is not merely a fiction but it is a historiographic metafiction. Therefore, the novel has to be read from this point of view. So that one can find how Achebe exposes the reality of Identity Crisis that the African went through under the clutches of British colonizers. That's why he credits his first book as being the primary step in his peace-making process.

"Although I did not set about it in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son." (Achebe, p.193)

One of the major findings of this research is that the novel, *Things Fall Apart* reveals the theme of 'liminal identity' which is a concept of psychologist Ruth Cobb Hill's. The meaning of this term is that the identity is divided; the identity is multiplicity rather than single identity; and further, the identity is in-between. Thus, the novel is full of struggle for identity. Each character of the novel goes through changes in their identity till the climax of the novel. Not only changes but also the characters go through loss of identity and identity crisis at the end. The main concern of the novel is the life of Okonkwo, a leader and local wrestling champion throughout the villages of the Ibo ethnic group of Umuofia in Nigeria, Africa, his three wives, and his children. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo is internally challenged and slowly becomes someone that is no longer recognizable by his friends or his family. Noticeably, when Okonkwo faces change, his identity starts to fade.

Okonkwo is one of the most powerful men in the Ibo tribe. The villagers either feared or honored him. He achieved this status by his own hard work and achievement. This is evident by this quote,

"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on the solid personal achievements. He brought honor to his tribe by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (Achebe 3).

Okonkwo wanted to be one of the highest leaders in the tribe, and was willing to do anything in order to achieve that goal. He loved his tribe, and they defined him. However, it lasted for few years and everything changed ups and down and was chased by his own tribe.

Okonkwo represented his own cultural traditional and religious identity but the arrival of the colonizers forced him to change. However, he stood firm not to yield to another identity. He fought for his own identity till the end and finally accepting his inability to safeguard his identity he committed suicide. The clan considered

"It is an abomination for a man to take his own life" (Achebe 186).

Okonkwo went from being someone that his clansman respected to a stranger that no one cared about. He was hated for his failure. Okonkwo not only lost his tribe, his family and his religion; but he also lost himself along the way. As the protagonist, Okonkwo represents the entire Africa, his failure to save his own identity, is considered as the loss of African Identity

The Igbo people had a very strong religious, cultural and traditional background. Their religion was very unique. Their rituals of religious practices and their traditional activities are very much interconnected and interlinked. They believed in many gods; they were a polytheistic tribe. The Ibo supreme god was *Chukwu*, and the people believed that:

"He made all the world and the other gods" (Achebe 179).

They also believed that everything has a spirit and that ancestral spirits called the *"Egwugwu"* kept the law. However, this belief system was collapsed by the arrival of Christianity in Africa. Some of them gave up their faith and began to believe in Christ preached by British priests. They were divided among themselves as believers and non-believers. Therefore, they began to lose their religious identity and became a liminal identity. According to Achebe, the arrival of the Christian missionaries brought unnecessary confusion among the native Africans. Thus, they lost their religious identity:

"The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta" (Achebe 131)

The arrival of Christian missionaries not only changed their religious identity but also it was the cause to lose their own language. The missionaries started education institutions and made the converters to study the language of the colonizers. For instance, Nwoye the son of Okonkwo also got converted to Christianity and learnt the language to read and write. That's how the Ibo language became weak and the colonizer's language became a dominant language. The Ibo people slowly lost their identity of their own language too.

In the same way, the native Ibo people began to lose their original culture and their own rituals for the religious practices. Following Christianity means Ibo people have to remove their own name and give up their titles after their name and take the new names from the Bible. For instance, the name of Nwoye was changed into Isaac. When the Ibo people convert into Christianity, they have to give up their cultural dress and remove the mask on their faces. It created conflict among the believers of Christianity and non-believers. These changes lead to identity crisis.

It is revealed in the story that the main reason for losing identity is the British colonizers who came to the African village in the name of civilization. According to the writer, it was enforcement of civilization that changed the attitude of the Africans and divided them. The following lines reveals in the name of civilization how the British divided the Africans.

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (Achebe 160)

Okonkwo, the protagonist, expresses these words of disappointment to Obierika, one of his friends, when he sees that everyone has turned against each other. He blames white men for the change, who have arrived in the African continent to spread their religion. However, Africans were not aware and they have proved unwise when they have allowed white people. The white men have divided them and taken control over them. The story reveals that this is how the Africans began to lose their own identity and began to show the liminal identity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research reveals that the major theme of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is Identity Crisis. Though this is a fiction, Achebe tries to express the reality behind the story of Ibo people. The changes that the people go through because of the colonization is the changes of their own identity. They have been undergoing cultural, religious, language, traditional and personality changes throughout the novel. In climax, the protagonist realizes that the changes cannot be tolerated by him and commits suicide. The death of the protagonist reveals the death of African society which lost its own identity. The message is that when one loses his or her own identity as someone or somebody, and begins to live with the identity of something else, it will lead to identity crisis. Originality cannot be changed. Originality cannot be replaced by duplicate. One's own cultural, religious, language and personal identity must be accepted as it is so that the originality is protected. Each one and everything under the sun is unique, it must be admired as it is. In reality no one can be identified as a multiple personality. Finally, the novel reveals that the Liminal Identity leads to destruction of the self. Thus, the theme of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is a search for true identity.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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