

MODERN AFRICAN CHILD AND AGENCY FOR DECOLONISATION IN SELECT NIGERIAN NOVELS

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Abstract

The paper extends beyond the portrayal of Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottle Leopard* as the postcolonial text which describes the colonised African society and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as feminist text. It interrogates the stronghold of colonial mentality and disillusionment that characterises the Modern African child in the quest for self-assertion and search for identity. Due to the colonial encounter, the indigenous identity of the African child has suffered disapproving retrogression, resulting into lack of confidence in African values. This paper, therefore, argues that the Modern African child today is still a victim of colonialism and remains at a crossroad in the unending search for self-discovery. It submits that the African child has been neglected and foregrounds Ike's stance that Western education, as well as Adichie's reflections on effects of Western religion, though part of the development phases of Modern African child, cannot continue to inhibit indigenous African ways of life.

Keywords: Modern African child, Decolonisation, Identity Reconstruction, Self-assertion, Postcolonialism

Introduction

The study of child characters in novels has underscored great significance across literatures from different cultures. From the perspective of first-person narrative technique, the child character has been known to generate convincing ambience of innocence, credibility and transparency in any given story. Also, the stylistic import of bildungsroman, whereby the story requires both physical and psychological growth on the part of the protagonist, would have been impossible without the child character. Hence, whether as a narrative technique or style, the use of child character has no doubt added legendary flavour to the literary expression of creative writers across the world.

However, the literary import of the African child goes beyond the above-mentioned categories. African writers have spawned out accurate reflections of African experiences as a result of colonisation. Ben Okri's *Famished Road* is a quintessential specimen. Through the naive eyes of the young Ozoro, the novel presents a broad view about the socio-cultural, political and thematic

preoccupations, prevalent in post-colonial Nigeria. It captures the historical moments, economic and political situation of the country. The narration continues with imageries of destruction, poverty, pain, sorrow, sickness, struggles, uncertainty, unemployment, worries, and finally, death.

Before Okri's novel, there are other examples of novels across the world that portray child character for varied reasons. Examples include Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Alex Haley's *Roots* and in fact Charles Dicken's renowned eponymous fiction, *Oliver Twist*. These novels' successes today stem from the creative enterprise of the child character. Beyond style and technique, the child character is indeed "a powerful agent through which salient themes, such as poverty, brutality, alienation, religion and politics are surveyed" (John Mugubi, 2012). This research, therefore, interrogates the disillusionment that characterizes the Modern African child in the unending quest for self-assertion and search for identity as a result of the overbearing influence of the colonial encounter. Through critical analysis, it engages two renowned texts, Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottle Leopard* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in portraying the need for continuous process of decolonisation through the eyes of the novels' protagonists.

Modern African Child and De-colonising the Mind

Many critics have attested to the notion that the connubial association between African culture and Western civilisation indeed gave rise (and is still giving) to myriads of more complex socio-political problems and economic glitches that presently have adverse effect on contemporary African societies. Among these, some have indeed furiously argued out their points at deep structure levels of African cosmology, which encompass significant phases such religion, philosophy, governance, morality, arts and literature. In the aspect of literature, which is relevant to the objective of this paper, Simon Gikandi, for instance, laments this union which he labelled as "traumatic" (54), while insisting that the exclusivity of African literature have been shredded by the illusory benefit of colonialism. He states:

But what is now considered to be the heart of literary scholarship on the continent (Africa) could not have acquired its current identity or function if the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe had not taken place. Not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their works. (54)

In other words, the blooming African literature (beginning from the twentieth century) is premised on the diverse experiences of colonialism, which many African authors are forcefully subjected to. Just like literature, other significant arrays of indigenous African presence have become grossly more of a shadow of themselves, while others, especially when considering the aspect of African languages, are fast dying out, given the overwhelming ascendancy of European influence. Against this backdrop, Viswanathan opines that British colonial administrators provoked by missionaries on the one hand and afraid of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education. (17) Tyson also rightly affirms that, "colonial ideology, which is inherently Eurocentric, was a pervasive force ... to inculcate British culture and values in the indigenous peoples and thereby forestall rebellion." (421)

Despite the fact that this claim is not geared towards discrediting Chinua Achebe's rational assertion which allows syncretism of Western civilisation and the African culture, the point here is that much attention, perhaps too much, is still being paid to Western idiosyncrasy, much to the detriment of the African indigenous values. And the result, for several decades since the unhallowed amalgamation, has remained unalterable; as Tyson had subsequently reaffirmed that the plan was quite successful which led to the creation of colonial subjects. And as such, certain colonial individual did not resist colonial subjugation due to the fact that they were educated to believe in British supremacy. This consequentially promotes their own sense of inferiority. Suffice to say that the aftermath of postcolonialism remains the bedrock of African literature today and its tenacious grip on socio-political realities on the continent further entrenches the de-formation of African identity.

While sustaining the above-mentioned fact, Kehinde posits further that, "the present-day African society is one that has the dominance of Western influence in almost all the areas of her political life." (301) It is however believed that the adjective "political" in this statement unduly assuaged the extent of the damage, or undermined the gravity of Western 'corruption' in almost every sphere of African worldview. Perhaps Kehinde realises this, and asserts in the following statement that "the indigenous traditions that existed before Western civilisation have now been relegated to the backstage, and their popularity which naturally ought to be the "home" of traditions has waned significantly." (302) It is this cogent matter, among others, that Chukwuemeka Ike addresses in his well-known novel, *The Bottled Leopard*. On the other hand, it is the consequence of this oversight that Ike has subtly foregrounded in this novel, which invariably also becomes the thrust of this paper.

Reading through this novel, it is difficult to ignore the quagmire of postcolonial identity as emphasised in the characterisation of Ugochukwu Amobi.

Ike's credibility as a writer is no doubt hinged on his distinct sensitivity to the identity crisis generated during the early postcolonial era in Africa, particularly from the position of postcolonial African child. His unflinching reflection of this societal problem buttresses the unquestionable belvedere of the writer. There is no doubt here that Ike has truly justified the words of Breyten Breytenbach, in his essay, "The Writer and Responsibility" (48) which underscores the point that "the writer's basic commitment is to the integrity of his own work". Ike's integrity lies in his ability to recognise and voice out on the postcolonial identity challenges affecting the Modern Africa Child. The question is, why just the child?

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Adichie is arguably one of the most popular literary texts in contemporary times due to its literary versatility as well as thematic veracity in relation to contemporary Nigerian sequence of events. While the novel exemplifies discourses on feminism, politics, oppression and disillusionment, family disintegration, religious hypocrisy and forces of colonialism, this essay focuses on trope of colonial identity, as earlier described by Tyson. Moreover, the presence/perspective of the children Kambili, the protagonist cum narrator and her brother Jaja, which draws parallel to Amobi, further presses home the notion of colonial identity in this essay. These young characters, in these respective narratives, are symbolic representations of the Modern African child and the challenges he/she faces as a result of continuous entrenchment of the colonial mentality.

It is surely important to note that different levels of African society, starting from families, communities, partisan groups to industries and multi-level organisations today are, directly or indirectly, facing and/or struggling with generational aftermaths of Western dominance. But of all these groups, the African child remains the ultimate victim. His/Her young existence reflects a mental imbalance that is often ignored or treated with pitiful levity. With the world getting warmer, the already weakened ice under his/her tired feet is getting thinner. Soon, he/she will be plunged into deep and cold waters of ignorance, with every trace of his/her inherent humanity replaced by an alien culture he/she would neither never understand nor boldly acknowledged.

Modern African Child, Colonial Mentality and Identity Reconstruction: A Critique of Selected Texts

Ugochukwu Amobi, the protagonist of the novel, serves as a quintessential representation of the identity quagmire of the African child, more as a result of objectionable regimentation of Eurocentric views over African beliefs. This is revealed in the early parts of the novel when Amobi's unrelenting curiosity about his ancestral beliefs remains opaque. His lack of understanding about his indigenous society is so frustrating that he had to make a swift decision before he

is overhauled by his ignorance in a culture that birthed him, before he becomes a victim of himself. The text reveals: "He made a resolution. He would take advantage of his entry into Government College to get full facts about leopards and their 'possessors'. From the little he had seen of the college, there could be no mystery beyond the powers of the learned masters...(6)". Therefore, a critical analysis of the character, Amobi, is the premise of this paper, in his search for his place in a transcendental African cosmology.

In a similar vein, the novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, opens with a negative profession of discord in the family by the protagonist, Kambili. "Things started falling apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room." (1) The conflict in the novel can be said to have begun between Jaja and his father, Papa Eugene. Immediately, the reader is drawn into the theme of religious hypocrisy and oppression. In fact, critics are outright on pinning Jaja's rebellion as against Papa Eugene. This essay extends on that assertion, arguing that it is more of a rebellion against flaming embers of colonial mentality, in which Papa Eugene is simply a casualty. Therefore, the pervasive force of oppression is not the character Papa Eugene. After all, he is noted for his humanitarian gestures and also recognised as a role model in the community. He takes care of his people and is overly generous. While Papa Eugene remains demonised in many quarters, little attention is paid to the agency of colonialism as the key albatross to the deformation, disintegration and desecration of the family as an important part of the African society.

Two queries remain pertinent to the overall discourse of the Modern African child. First, what is the evidence that the Modern African child is considered to be the most affected when it comes to colonial indoctrination? The evidence lies in the process of learning, knowledge gained and/or experience garnered that would foster and/or improve on the survival of the said child, in whatever environment he or she inhabits. In an attempt to explicate further, the principal excerpt from Gikandi's "African Literature and the Colonial Factor" would again be most beneficial.

But what is considered to be the heart of literary scholarship on the continent could not have acquired its current (unstable) identity or function if the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe had not taken place. Not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their works... the colonial situation shaped what it meant to be an African writer (teacher), shaped the language of African writing, and over determined the culture of letters in Africa.

Simply put, the Modern African child now depends solely on Western literacy (alphabetic writing and reading) for the acquisition of knowledge about his immediate environment. With language comes the subjective interpretation of culture, philosophy, religion ideology and so on. But the real challenge lies in the teachers (founders and writers) who, according to Gikandi, were also slaves to the overwhelming colonial situation. In the attempt to adapt to the over exegesis of the Western civilisation, these African custodians of knowledge have chosen to ignore or, more succinctly, continually relegated to the background the African ideology and philosophy (as contained in its cultural practices) which remain the key to identity development for contemporary African Child.

The second query, which is probably more significant, questions the capacity level of the African child in upholding the native tenets of his/her root? This question would be first considered, with reference to the modest ideology that governs a well-known universal paradox which calmly states that "the egg is the father of the cock". Simply put, the African Child ultimately becomes the custodian of the different levels of African society, reiterated thus: family, government, and so on. Given the initial irrationality accorded to paradoxes in general, one may argue choose to argue that the egg is always the by-product of the procreative actions of any given cock, hence the egg remains a lesser entity. Be that as it may, the argument here fervently buttresses the cyclical order in the relationship between the egg and the cock, whereby the egg naturally comes *first* before the cock! Against this backdrop, the Modern African child ought to come first, especially in relation to the internalisation of his customs and traditions, that are eventually transferred to successive generations.

Alex Haley, the African American writer of the renowned novel, *Roots*, recognises the import of this crucial step towards identity construction, as emphasised during the naming ceremony of the principal character, Kunta Kinte. The import of his writer pinpoints the significance of the African child and equally foregrounds the import of African values being essentially indoctrinated into the African youth right from infancy. The text speaks;

Out under the moon and the stars, alone with his son that eighth night, Omoro completed the naming ritual. Carrying little Kunta in his strong arms, he walked to the edge of the village, lifted his baby up with his face to the heavens and said softly, "Fend liling dorong leh warrata ka iteh tee." (behold – the only thing greater than yourself) (3)

The confidence instilled in Kunta (right from his unconscious state as an infant) which lasted the period of his childhood until he was carried off by slave masters never left him. As a slave survivor, it was that identity consciousness that

propelled his longevity amidst horrendous struggles. The point here is an immediate contrast to Amobi, who despite being close to home still lacked the capacity to understand his existence in a less harsh, complex world than the one Kunta faced. One way or the other, the Modern African Child lacks the propensity to understand his world, compared to the pre-literate African child (such as Kunta Kinte) who was properly 'educated' with essential African societal norms and values.

Ike's *The Bottle Leopard* remains one of the sacrosanct African literary works which amplify the creed of colonialism. And so, it is typical to align the writer's response with other postcolonial African writers, the likes of Ngugi wa Thiongó, Elechi Amadi, Mongo Beti, Frank Chipasula, Nadine Gordimer, Tsitsi Danaremba, and of course Chinua Achebe, to mention but a few. Majority of the works of these writers aptly replicate the collective theme of colonisation and its adverse effect. However, Chukwuemeka Ike's choice of the African child as a direct recipient of colonial indoctrination remains the driving force of this study.

To begin with, the common tenet of double consciousness initiates the template for colonisation. This term is said to have been coined by W.E.B. DuBois, as reflected in his article "Strivings of the Negro People." This essay was later republished and the title was changed to read "Of Our Spiritual Strivings", the first essay among the collection of fourteen essays in his famed book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. According to DuBois, "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." (2) Here, DuBois predicts the birth of internally generated conflict as a result of a psychological imbalance in the status quo of identity construction.

Amobi clearly falls under this category. But not only him but the entire group of new students who witnessed a physically horrendous initiation ceremony at the Government College School. Apart from the new students being made to drink urine, they are coerced to address themselves publicly in a manner that it is deplorable by all standards. In fact, these denigrating recitations do much more than that. Amobi is made to publicly denounce himself, together with his indigenous ways of life, described as 'stinking', 'rustic' and 'outlandish'. Clearly, these words are not far from Joseph Conrad's description of Africa.

I come from the bush village of Onitsha, ...where people eat toads for supper. I am a fag, stinking fag. I am, like all fags, to be seen, not heard. As from this day, I promise to discard all my rustic and outlandish behavior and to become a worthy student of this great college. (10)

These confessions, as detailed in the novel, foreground the premise for self-alienation, and displacement. They further deconstruct the formation of Africa's home-grown identity and also irreparably retrogress the psychological and philosophical awareness of indigenous values and practices peculiar to their ancestral birth. Ike recognises this adversity in Amobi who "emerged from the ceremony totally dejected and confuse. Never in his life had he been made to feel so out of place for coming from a rural village". (10) In the end, he rises to the occasion, even more determined to investigate one of the most intriguing indigenous African phenomena that does not just articulate his African history but further shapes his African personality.

Other critics have also attempted the definition of the notion 'double consciousness. Tyson's (1999) definition addresses this term as "a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the coloniser and that of the indigenous community". Again, one's mind cannot escape the instantaneous psychological delineation that these new boys experienced at the initiation ceremony. Although the words of the Fag's Pledge from the master of ceremonies generate appreciable measure of comedy, it is expedient to expose the adverse effect of the colonial nuances in the words. The use of words such as "bush boy", "fat pig" and other expletives do have a socio-cultural implication and as well deconstructs the very identity that roadmaps the African child more as a victim of his own circumstance, albeit his birthplace, language and race. These are the trails that mark the beginning of colonisation and the gradual rejection of African heritage in the consciousness of the modern African child.

In addition, *Purple Hibiscus* introduces the quagmire of modern African children in foregrounding their sense of identity within the purview of colonial indoctrination. The novel begins with the reflection of colonial indoctrination, whereby the conundrums or conflicts in the narrative start with the unanticipated refusal of Jaja, the narrator's brother, in succumbing to religious indoctrination borne out of sheer hypocrisy. Kambili's description of Father Benedict's open denigration of the Igbo language and duplicitous admiration of Bro Eugene could not have been missed by Jaja. His quietness in the novel is certainly not a coincidence. On the contrary, he is in fact a brilliant chap whose calm disposition is as a result of deep meditation and critical reasoning. And when Papa (Bro Eugene) demanded why he didn't go to communion, his articulation reveals his disdain for Father Benedict's colonial indoctrination. Jaja's response was a reaction against colonial suppression; his unyielding resolution was a conscious effort towards decolonisation. "The wafer (holy communion) gives me bad breathe... And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me (6)."

And when Papa Eugene responded, it was with the garment of a colonial ruler, who, according to Frantz Fanon, abuses his son with the privileges of

colonial power. He immediately threatens Jaja with the immediacy of death. But Jaja's response to colonial pressure was emphatic. "Then, I will die... Then, I will die, Papa" (6/7). Here, Adichie strongly projects the absolute necessity for decolonisation for Africa, as seen through the eyes of Jaja. She toes the line of Ike in foregrounding the colonial victimisation of the modern African child who, at the cost of rejection of colonialism, struggle at the periphery of societal tolerability and acceptability.

Conclusion

The Modern African child today is still much of a victim of colonialism and remains at a crossroad in the unending search for self-discovery. This assertion remains the thrust in this paper, as the two colonial victims, Ugochukwu Amobi and Jaja, struggle to discern, comprehend and control themselves in a complex world that keeps them perpetually confused about truth and reality. The novel in a way pontificates at the overbearing influence of Western empiricism over sacrosanct phases of African philosophy. As exemplified in Amobi, many African children today not only disregard their native culture, but also lack enough capacity to understand their roots, given the complexities that besiege the Modern African societies. This paper submits that an insurrection of African values must serve as necessary extension to Western education. It is only then that Modern African Child can fully understand as well as retain the African identity in the face of globalisation.

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