

Creating Identity out of the Postcolonial Void

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IN THE LAST half of the twentieth century many postcolonial cultures have found themselves out of balance. During colonization the people lived a kind of non-existence, a living void; their identities had been stolen. To establish dominion, the colonial power eradicated previous religions, educational structures, and languages. Although the indigenous person adopted a Western identity through the colonizer, it was an illusion, empty of meaning, because the native culture, in all its complexity, was not recognized by the colonizer. Essentially the people became impostors of themselves. Their personal and cultural history had been destroyed as one of the implications of colonial rule. Since the complex identity of the native was not acknowledged, the native essentially never existed as a unique individual in the colonizer's eyes.

The identity inflicted on the indigenous person was a meaningless stereotype masking the true identity that had become void. This vacancy will be explored from the context of abuse of power. This void is the denial of identity and a life with no meaning; the mask of colonial identity covering the void is an illusion. Taking off the mask in the postcolonial world does not necessarily

reveal a full individual; the colonial erasure of cultural and personal identity appears to be permanent.

The enduring exploitation of formerly colonised nations has been defined using the term Neo-colonialism. The term implies a nation with a continued reliance upon the former imperial power and the West in general, but more specifically neo-colonialism also implies a persistent state of confusion of selfhood for the individual and for the whole nation. We spend our lives constructing unique personal traits and individually recognizable selves created from different sources. In the globalisation of today's society, the notion of identity is becoming increasingly complex, especially with an added complication of post-colonization. Many individuals do not communicate in their indigenous language, were not schooled using textbooks reflecting their particular social and cultural situations, or had Western instructors; even their religions did not reflect their own indigenous religious history. The definition of one's self has become multi-layered and essentially fractured.

The departure of the colonizing power forced the postcolonial world out of balance placing the formerly colonized nations into a new and continued version of dependence upon the West. M.G. Vassanji's novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, covering fifty years of Kenyan history, focuses on neocolonial imbalance and the elaborate postcolonial reappraisal of cultures. In the beginning of the text, the Kenyan people are on the lowest rung of the social ladder with whites and Indians in power. In 1965 after Kenya assumed political independence and Jomo Kenyatta became president of the new nation, an elaborate repositioning of the classes occurred. This tumultuous period contributed to a chaos that fed lawless activities, realigning individuals in Western nations with Kenyan politicians and private citizens in the extortion that harmed the Kenyan people yet again.

Vassanji's elaborate novel depicts an international racketeering allowing some individuals like the protagonist, Vik, to get very rich. The novel begins with a confession:

My name is Vikram Lall. I have the distinction of having been numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning. To me has been attributed the emptying of a large part of my troubled country's treasury in recent years. I head my country's List of Shame. (Vassanji 3)

Through his employer Vik is involved with an illegal scheme in which private individuals essentially operate their own bank with no government restrictions, providing the government no financial benefit. Kenya is a “country of ten millionaires and ten million paupers” (Vassanji 259). Vik is in the middle of a handful of Kenyans who profit enormously from European and American fraud.

Using Vik's childhood friend, Njoroge, as a symbol of the Kenyan people and their resistance movement, we can conclude that Vik's illegal activities essentially contribute to Njoroge's death. In the beginning of the novel, Njoroge sympathizes with the Mau Mau, refers to Jomo Kenyatta as the Black Moses, and takes Vik to a meeting of “former freedom fighters Mau Mau, as they used to be called” (Vassanji 153). Later in the novel, Njoroge realizes that Jomo Kenyatta, the man he believed would lead the Kenyans to a better future, had become corrupt and the Mau Mau have been betrayed. Njoroge is killed by a political rival of Kariuki, the honest man he hopes will become president, who is also the rival of Jomo Kenyatta, the man Vik is enabling to profit from the illegal scam. This complicated entanglement leading to Vik's enormous profits essentially links Vik's actions to Njoroge's murder. At the end of the

novel Vik's realization of the ramifications of his scam leads to his suicide.

Kenya is out of balance; its people suffer because of a corrupt government with corrupt politicians and self-serving, greedy men and women. Kenya is also still economically dependent upon the West. Vik is the middle-man in a lucrative hustle that brings American dollars into the country so that Jomo Kenyatta's government will stay in power. Paul Nderi, Kenya's Minister of Transport and Vik's boss, tells Vik:

These are donations to our party from well-wishers abroad. ...Honest-to-God donations from private individuals. I would like you to find your Indian contacts and have them change this money and stash it; like in a bank. . . . And when our different constituencies need money for their operations, they will be paid by those Indians. (Vassanji 257)

Although there is no direct implication by Nderi of any Western nation, it is clear that corruption has spread throughout all cultures in Kenya and throughout the West. Even though Nderi is not a trustworthy character, the reader can believe that the two men with whom Vik exchanges money-stacked suitcases are American citizens. While it is possible that millions of dollars are given by private American citizens who are concerned about the possibility of a "great danger from the communists" (Vassanji 256); it is also highly unlikely that one individual would have access to so much cash and would be altruistically concerned solely with the Kenyan government. Therefore, this draining of Kenya's wealth is an example of neo-colonialism, an enduring exploitation of a formerly colonised nation creating a continued reliance upon the West, implicating the American government. The people who

suffer the most grievously are the majority of the Kenyan people. As a symbol of those people, Njoroge is the only true innocent.

Throughout the essay "On National Culture," Frantz Fanon argues that a native writer assists in the process of cultural and personal re-identification by acting as a communicator of the national struggle to the people. It is the writer's task and unique ability to use literature to describe the illusion, the void, and thereafter, the imbalance created. He can evoke the identification process from the culture of which he writes. Fanon clarifies this potential in his interpretation of a poem by Keita Fodeba: "The understanding of the poem is not merely an intellectual advance, but a political advance. There is not a single colonized person who will not perceive the message that this poem holds" (Fanon 231). By using his own heart for exploration, the native author communicates the struggle to the people, and thereby helps the people begin to define a new voice. In removing his own colonial mask of illusion, the writer assists each individual in their own private struggle to remove the illusory mask.

On the one hand Fanon implies that there is an old identity in which the indigenous person can be re-attired. However, he also acknowledges that the old identity is extinct. Relying on the security of a past identity is problematic:

The artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically toward the past and away from actual events. What he ultimately intends to embrace are in fact the castoffs of thought, its shells and corpses, a knowledge which has been stabilized once and for all. But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. He must go on until he has found the seething pot out of

which the learning of the future will emerge. (Fanon 225)

If the artist puts on a destroyed mask, it reinforces the abstraction of stereotype and the idea that the ghost of the past is an empty white sheet. Even though Fanon believes it is possible to re-wear that stereotype, he also believes it is worthless and that no future exists by wearing the empty mask. It is the chaotic present that holds the essence of the future. Moreover, it is only the first of three stages that the native intellectual will progress through before he becomes “an awakener of the people” (Fanon 223). While the present may contain elements of the past, for example language, even the native language itself is in the process of transformation; and it is that transformation that is the key to progress.

Fanon's argument for a people's revolution focuses on Algeria and the still present French colonialist power (1963); but the reasoning behind his argument can be generally applied to many, if not all states. His notions are relevant to a postcolonial world and the issue of neo-colonialism. The native intellectual must analyze and communicate the struggle to the people in a language they will understand; this is empowering to the most vulnerable class, those without money and power, the majority of the population.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose first novels were written in English, the colonizer's language, has long chosen to write in his native Gikuyu rather than English. Historically the Gikuyu people are an oral culture. According to Ngugi, although the Gikuyu may not have the money to buy his books, they discuss his ideas in community gatherings. By his choice of language, Ngugi accepts and acknowledges the importance of his role as communicator and facilitator these discussions:

It was easy for people to write in the language of their colonization because it was the language of their conceptualization, the language of education, the language in which they attempted to intellectually grasp the world around them. I believe that the language issue is a very important key to the decolonization process. What is really happening now is that African thought is imprisoned in foreign languages. (*Interviews* 30)

In other words, African identity has been stolen. When the colonisers replaced the Gikuyu language and when the education system was translated into a Western one, it weakened Gikuyu identity. When the writer communicates to the people in Gikuyu, he is making a conscious decision to communicate to the majority of the people in a language they can trust and understand. Potentially there are unique thoughts within the Gikuyu language that can only be expressed with that language. Paradoxically, language is a portion of the old identity, but it is also a tool which can transform and be manipulated to shape the present, becoming an essential part of the new identity. Moreover, the development of a new language creates new identity; it does not resurrect an old one. Accordingly, since the texts chosen for this paper are written in English, perhaps there might be something missing or lacking. However, what can be gained from the cultural variety of texts is the notion that the postcolonial void ignores international boundaries.

The colonising agents of education, religion, and language erase individuality and contribute to instability in the world in each of the following texts. Each text depicts a different stage of colonial power: the imposition of rule, the initial occurrences of strikes against colonial authority, and the effects of colonization. In the first text, several things fall apart with the imposition of colonial

rule: a man's life; his tribe; and Nigeria, his country. Achebe begins *Things Fall Apart* by quoting the first four lines of *The Second Coming* by W.B. Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Yeats's notion that humans have created a dark and foreboding future with no connection between their own humanity and spirituality is implicit and explicit in Achebe's novel. There is a loss of common purpose, instability, and great unrest in a world spinning out of control.

The novel is replete with symbolism emphasizing these notions. For example several of Achebe's characters function as symbols. While Okonkwo, the protagonist, is a complex character, he also symbolizes traditional Igbo society; he is defined by his culture, clan, and his rigid role in that clan. He is also a flawed character with some of his destruction being self-inflicted. For example even though he is warned not to participate in the killing of his surrogate son, he fears "being thought weak" and so strikes the fatal blow (Achebe 43). This blow destroys his family since it drives his son to the colonizer's religion where he is given a new self-identity, "Isaac" (Achebe 129). On the one hand Okonkwo's resolute behaviour kills him and contributes to the fracturing of his tribe; however, his daughter, Ezinma, symbolizes the future of the clan when she crawls into the cave and womb-like safety of Africa, transported on the back of the oracle, Chielo.

Religion is clearly represented as a colonising agent; the missionaries reject the authenticity of indigenous beliefs and thereby contribute to the colonising process by stripping away the

already present and functioning religion and converting to Western education. Missionaries are responsible for sending Okonkwo's son to a British school where he is renamed. Therefore, Okonkwo's determined nature is only a part of the destructive force: "From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand" in the colonization of Nigeria (Achebe 128). The benevolence of both education and religion reduce Okonkwo and his whole clan to "not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph" in the colonial text: "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger" (Achebe 147-8). Therefore, missionaries contribute to the death of the clan since they are responsible for the loss of their next generation: "Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, [is sent] to the new training college for teachers" (Achebe 129).

The dichotomy is that the Igbo will let the white people stay and worship their own gods: "It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt. Our anger is great but we have held it down so that we can talk to you" (Achebe 134). The Igbo are a very peaceful culture and will accept a Western god; but, their welcoming nature contributes to the destruction of their clan, since Western religion does not recognize any other gods. The distinctiveness of the Igbo culture is eradicated through religion and education:

Our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? 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 124-5)

Okonkwo is aware of how some white men have colonized and destroyed another village. He cannot allow other white men to destroy his own village since his own sense of self is represented by traditional Igbo culture; the destruction of his village would imply the destruction of himself. Clearly, for Okonkwo he must kill the white messenger. He then hears members of his tribe questioning his actions. He now understands that his tribe has fallen apart; therefore, he has fallen apart. Okonkwo has no future since there is no future for his tribe. He has lost his identity. Death is his only alternative.

Religion and education as colonizing agents also dominate the text of *Weep Not, Child*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The protagonist, Njoroge, also completely accepts Western education and religion. The novel is a Bildungsroman for Njoroge, an innocent child with a dream to go to an English school and complete faith in "the righteousness of God" (Ngugi 49). Njoroge symbolizes the Gikuyu people. He has a dream of a "bright future" in which he will "have a shirt and shorts for the first time" (Ngugi 3-4). He believes himself to be a saviour or religious leader for the Gikuyu: "His task of comforting people had begun" (Ngugi 95). This notion supports an allusion to Jomo Kenyatta, previously discussed in Vassanji's novel, the leader of the Mau Mau and president of Kenya. The people believed that Jomo would save them and their country. But when Jomo became president, eventually the government became corrupt. Njoroge's dreams are also broken and lost in the illusion of the coloniser: "'The sun will rise tomorrow,' he said triumphantly, looking at her as if he would tell her that he would never lose faith, knowing as he did that God had a secret plan" (Ngugi 106). Njoroge's dream, like the Kenyan people's dream, is shattered at the end of the novel by a corrupt government still economically

dependent upon the West.

This benevolent gift of Western religion and education proves to be an elaborate deception. Njoroge walks through the woods with his teacher, a Gikuyu who has now re-identified himself as Isaka, while “discussing the saving power of Christ” (Ngugi 101). White soldiers stop them and murder Isaka after accusing him of being a terrorist. Then white men take Njoroge from his school and beat him so badly that he falls into a coma. Soldiers torture and castrate Ngotho, his father, who dies from the torture. After so much tragedy, life itself becomes “a big lie” for Njoroge (Ngugi 126). While ironically recalling his lost faith, Njoroge considers his religious belief and Western ideals:

O, God But why did he call on God? God meant little to him now. For Njoroge had now lost faith in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, religion. Even love, his last hope, had fled from him. (Ngugi 134)

Njoroge realizes that this Western charitable deception would ultimately lead to his pacification. He now understands that as soon as he would have become educated and developed his own voice, any hope of power or wealth would have been taken away: “I know that my tomorrow was an illusion” (Ngugi 132). His identity as defined by Western religion and education and as imposed by colonialism was an empty illusion.

Ngugi chooses a protagonist who symbolizes innocence and total acceptance of colonial conformity. Since Njoroge is a child his life is comparatively easy to disrupt and overwhelm with a new self-identity. He is easy to deceive and once his fragile identity is erased, he has nothing to fall back on. On the other hand, Okonkwo has a more fully formed sense of self and will not accept defeat; but

because Okonkwo is a lone voice with no other men from the tribe supporting him, his voice will not be heard. It is clear with all both characters that their loss of self-identity is complete. They are unable to return to any past religion, education or cultural definition of themselves through their clans or alone.

Therefore, the mask of Western identity is an illusion. This idea is clearly supported by the texts: Western education, religion, and language simply do not function for Njoroge, Okonkwo, and Vik. Moreover, once the colonizer has left, the enormity of the remaining void is so overwhelming that each character either contemplates or commits suicide. There is literally nothing left to live for when the illusion and deception of a Western identity is revealed.

Specifically Okonkwo's clan no longer supports him, rather they support the Western intruders; his son no longer practices the indigenous religion and has been given a Christian name; and Okonkwo sees no future since he refuses to accept colonial domination. Okonkwo hangs himself even though suicide “is an abomination. ...[and] his body is evil, and only strangers may touch it” (Achebe 147). However, his clan pays him a final, clarifying tribute: “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog” (Achebe 147).

Njoroge also contemplates suicide and sits holding a rope with which he hopes to hang himself at nightfall. He hears an evil voice urging him to “*Go on!*” and kill himself (Ngugi 135). He laughs while contemplating his action. It is futile to attempt to go against the Western colonizers. However, Njoroge does not commit suicide:

His mother was looking for him. For a time he stood

the girl into the night, Ezinma redefines her social identity by submitting to a dangerous ordeal, a liminal phase, prior to reintegrating with her family and clan. The future will be found in the union of native people sharing their struggle, courageous enough to create new religion, language, and educational systems.

A void is left with the disappearance of the colonial power; the economic and political power structure is gone, and each individual is bereft of a definition of himself. Neo-colonialism maintains the relationship with the colonizer rendering the people once again devoid of an identity. The process of community organization is the essential step in the process of re-identification of both the individual and the state. The people's struggle is where the new identity is born:

We believe that the conscious and organized undertaking by a colonized people to re-establish the sovereignty of that nation constitutes the most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists. . . . The struggle for freedom does not give back to the national culture its former value and shapes; this struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men cannot leave intact either the form or the content of the people's culture. After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man. (Fanon 245-6)

Fanon's focus is on the genesis of national culture and thereby of the discovery of a separate and unique personality. Nation-building as a process not only emerges when the colonizer is in power, but continues in the postcolonial period and creates the new identity. Therefore, while the colonial erasure of identity appears a

irresolute. Then courage failed him. He went towards her, still trembling. And now he again seemed to fear meeting her. He saw the light she was carrying and falteringly went towards it. It was a glowing piece of wood which she carried to light the way. (Ngugi 135)

While carrying a burning candle, his mother brings him back to the clan. The only place Njoroge can establish and create a new identity is with his own people joining their struggle to survive. At the end of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vik also sees a glow from a fire. It is surrounding a man who calls to Vik from the bottom of a staircase, attempting to save his life. However, Vik chooses to run away from the glow and kill himself. Ultimately Vik cannot forget his betrayal of his people.

Symbolically the idea of re-weaving and re-creating a connection with one's tribe can be seen in Achebe's novel. Immediately after hearing her mother tell a folk story about a Tortoise falling from the sky and smashing into pieces symbolising the fall of the British, Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, is called by the oracle. Chielo specifically calls upon and addresses her prophecy to Ezinma, the symbol of African hope: "Chielo never ceased in her chanting. She greeted her god in a multitude of names the owner of the future, the messenger of earth" (Achebe 75). Ezinma's womanhood is of interest since Okonkwo is "specially fond of Ezinma" (Achebe 32), and in fact, "never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl" (Achebe 122). Since Okonkwo represents the past and the traditional values of the clan, he cannot appreciate Ezinma because of her womanhood; but he does appreciate her value. She symbolizes rebirth and the future of the clan. Immediately after Ezinma listens to the allegorical folk tale, she begins a journey to a cave on Chielo's back. As the priestess carries

permanent condition, by allowing the re-emerging state and individual to define new selves, the culture will be reborn.

Fanon defines this re-emergence of identity as a people's revolution placing great importance on individuals organizing at the community level and emphasizing the assistance of the native intellectual in the form of a writer and artist. He also places importance on appreciating the individual citizen and the individual state as unique entities, not as oversimplified concepts. Therefore Nigeria and Kenya are not merely anonymous postcolonial states containing indistinctive postcolonial men and women; they are regions with ancient historical backgrounds that contain, in the present, unique human beings who are re-creating their political, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities. Not only must new selves be re-created, but neo-colonial interference based upon economic greed must be eliminated.

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