

The Ethnic Intersection between Culture and Identity in Selected Postcolonial Works

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Abstract

This paper examines culture and identity in selected postcolonial works. The study looks into identity and culture to investigate the ethnic traits of Haitian, American, and Nigerian ethnicity depicted in the selected stories. It follows a close reading of the stories' texts to explore the thematic nuances of Danticat's, Walker's, and Nwokolo's postcolonial style. That is, the selected stories portray the literary reverberations created by Danticat and Walker, and Nwokolo to offer a universal view of the Haitian-American and Nigerian cultural changes that affected their native identity. By studying the characters and settings, the mythology applies the concepts of culture and identity to unravel the authors' attempts to enhance their ethnicity teetering on the brink of postcolonial cultural transformation.

Key words: Culture; Ethnicity; Identity; Post-colonialism; Society

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of culture designates the interpretation of texts that shed light on the primary cultural traits needed to understand any ethnicity. Culture refers to the crucial and

precise comprehension of certain nations that radically differ from other cultural or social counterparts. In this respect, post-colonialism perceives the concept of identity in terms of the metropolitan influence upon the colonized nations. It highlights such influence through cultural and social transformation of the colonized nations; and such transformation is "one of the indications of the *postcolonial identity* or the awakening of cultural *identity* in the contemporary world" (Bakırtaş 57). On the one hand, the cultural differences are the core changes created by imperial hegemony which resulted in radical cultural norms adopted by the colonies' nativity. Yet, these colonies try to preserve their inherited cultural traditions in the face of the new imperial culture.

On the other hand, social transformation implies imperialism's social norms brought to the colonized nations' native society. As a result, these nations are profoundly affected by the colonizers' social customs and traditions. In this sense, they develop hybrid identity which later becomes an integral aspect of their ethnicity. Being so, the social characteristics of postcolonial identity are appropriated within the broad scope of discursive narratives written on ethnicity "from a postcolonial perspective, identity – especially 'racialized' identity – [which] is something that may be imposed at least as much as assumed by individuals and groups (parentheses added)" (Heywood and Whitham 264).

Culture and identity, therefore, are inextricable concepts approached by postcolonial narrative discourse. They are definitive factors of the original traits inherited and adopted by any ethnicity; and this ethnicity hands it down to future generations in order to preserve the pure ethnic roots. Yet, they are relatively disrupted by the advent of colonialism, and, they intermingle with the new postcolonial culture; whereby "the collateral damage in the complicated performance of *identity* in a *postcolonial* society not only impacts an individual

person but also traumatizes his / her loved ones” (Ni and Wang 132). The importance of postcolonial identity also lies in the residuals left by ancestors, and it is handed down to posterity generations. However, postcolonial hegemony violates the successive ethnic lines between ancestors and their posterity. It leads to inherent changes related to culture and society. In this sense, the concept of identity designates this ethnic succession and how it transforms due to imperial domination brought by post-colonialism. This study aims to shortly discuss culture and identity in selected works by Danticat, Walker, and Nwokolo.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 Edwidge Danticat

“Everything Inside” by Edwidge Danticat is abundant with cultural hints on cosmopolitanism. Yet, the story sheds light on the issues by virtue of cosmopolitanism. Another story, which is “The Gift,” for example treats the issue of ethnicity and identity in the context of cosmopolitanism. This is due to its treatment of identity and culture within the limits of postcolonial social attributes created by the colonial discourse which is often “examined through a critical perspective on *postcolonial* nationalism that treated *identity* and sovereignty, and particularly the link between the two, as a constructed relationship that could and did take various” (Orellana and Michelsen 211). Danticat, here, offers a vivid picture of post-colonialism could affect the native culture and identity by depicting a fictional world related to the stereotypical image of life before and after colonialism and its appropriation of identity which “asserts a sense of belonging to the locality in which post-colonial subjects have evolved, and, at the same time, expresses the specificity of the actual racial experience of being ethnic, or alienated in homeland” (Abu Jweid, p.6).

Danticat’s “The Gift, furthermore highlights the intersection between culture and identity in the light of social transformation. This is due to the fact that the emergence of new cultural norms and traits are ascribed to post-colonialism and its view of identity which may be “influenced by colonial hegemony; and authors could use their dialogic narrative voice to comment on the fictional nature of their texts” (Abu Jweid, 2022a, p.21). For, example, the objective omniscient narrator gives us a vivid picture of how the American cosmopolitan life became. The depiction of Miami’s mundane life is an example of this cosmopolitan life-style: “The crate-style coffee tables on which the meals were served had always been a challenge” (83). Here, native identity is approached by the experience of the story’s characters because “one could also observe memory and *identity* conflicts at the very local level” (Konarzewska and Nakai, p.xi).

In Danticat’s “Without Inspection,” similarly, the plot

hinges on cosmopolitanism which draws on the inherited image of native identity. The story’s characters embody this individual identity within composition culture. The story’s appropriation of cosmopolitan identity opposes the colonial hegemonic discourses since the change of identity “conditions would reopen the wounds of the postcolonial crisis, which historically stimulated the need to reaffirm one’s sectarian identity” (Mahlouly, p.159). As such, the core conceptual implication of Danticat’s depiction of cosmopolitanism is limited by society and colonialism. For example, Darline exemplifies the Caribbean paradigm of cosmopolitan culture. She was sitting by the shore and watching other people of different cultures and cosmopolitan backgrounds: “Darline had been the only person sitting on the beach in the predawn light the morning that he, nine other men, and four women were ditched in the middle of the sea and told by the captain to swim ashore” (p.203).

2.2 Walker’s “Everyday Use”

Walker’s “Everyday Use” encompasses historical and biographical insights concerning the feminist reality of black women. In this sense, Walker depicts the precise conceptualization of patriarchy and how black women suffer under this social system. Dee and Maggie suffer from it; and they try to avoid it. Such fact is a manifestation of her resistance of patriarchy. Walker deviates their patriarchal restrictions because “individuals and groups feel increasingly threatened by distorted claims about their *identity*” (Brenkert, p.120).

As such, she is an example of masculine persecution and gender oppression conducted for the sake of emphasizing the reality of black women under severe feminist conditions. The feminist and patriarchal obsession with black women is the authentic exemplification of rescuing women who undergo the same patriarchal experience in reality. In this sense, Walker focuses on the historical and biographical implications of feminism in a postcolonial world; and culture and identity intersect with each other when “the black people were deprived of their human dignity. They are treated in a lower position that affects their identity and human dignity. There were no serious steps to be taken in order to limit the treatment of black people in inferior positions” (Abu Jweid, p.25).

2.3 Chuma Nwokolo’s “Billy Goat”

Chuma Nwokolo’s “Billy Goat” is an obtrusive example of the Nigerian literary boom during the recent decades. The story hinges on diverse literary themes that are very essential for grasping the cultural context in which it was written. The setting is purely Nigerian as the story introduces national places called “Langa Valley” where the main action takes places. Consequently, I tend to explain the cultural and the literary peculiarities of the story are setting. As a matter of fact, literary settings are

both temporal and spatial (Novakova and Siepman, p.36). The temporal settings refer to the time depicted in the plot, while the spatial setting indicates the regional characteristics of the fictional places portrayed in the course of the plot. In Nwokolo's "Billy Goat," the spatial settings, mentioned above, is Nigerian, it incorporates Nigerian vernacular places convey an implied message to the reader about the nature of this place and how it reflects the story's concern with Nigerian socio-political affairs; and the cause of "the deterioration in national identity symbolically correlates to the protagonist's personal irresolute experience which is at first physically powerful but in the end spiritually weak" (Abu Jweid, p.30).

The spatial setting, furthermore, includes a village; and Nwokolo introduces the major initial events and protagonist, Gwarimpa, in the expository phase of the story. The village is called Sandia where the protagonist lives with his wife. In his little village of Sandia, Gwarimpa was getting all the wrong signals from his wife of six months" (1). At this point, Nwokolo gives us a vivid picture of the social life of the Nigerian family life. Gwarimpa's house provides us with a conspicuous hint about how the houses and native traditions were during Nigerian postcolonial era. Gwarimpa leads that simple native Nigerian life "in that young house of his matrimony" (p.1). Therefore, Langa Valley, the village, and the house are all literary indicators of the story's spatial setting. On the other hand, the story's temporal setting seems to be a postcolonial Nigerian. This is clear when the plot describes the protagonists as a man haunted by demonic thoughts as he interacts with his family and other political matters. He is haunted by spouses' devilish attitudes toward their husbands. He thinks of the way the villages get changed over the course of time: "Gwarimpa sat on his bed to wait, knowing that silent dread that was the curse of spouses who returned home inconveniently" (p.1). In this case, Gwarimpa thinks of women behaviors in his village. This is achieved through the plot's deictic details; and "this refers to the fact of literature that exemplifies the identity of the characters" (Abu Jweid, 2022b, p.25).

The Nigerian setting offers diverse themes tackled in the plot. This is because Nigeria has undergone tremendous socio-cultural changes recently (Ette, p.5). In a striking way, Nwokolo highlights the theme of family disintegration since there are obvious hints about Gwarimpa and the aversive responses of his wife. When he comes from one of his political missions, he finds his wife changed. She is no longer warmly and lively responsive to his passionate over for her. She does receive him as ever: "she was no longer as responsive to the playful palm he laid on her shoulder of an evening. It took that much more to say what he wanted... and even then she managed not to understand" (p.1). In this sense, the

wife exemplifies the themes of family disintegration because her husband is often engaged in political affairs; and he does not attend to his family responsibility as a priority in his life. This is because it is important for native people "to be mindful of and try to avoid cultural and gender essentialism in efforts to understand, theorise ... that people develop a postcolonial identity resulting from interactions between different identities" (Ali and Rogers, p.234).

The story's depiction of family disintegration and a Nigerian setting embodies the entire social affairs. It unravels the archetypal image of the Nigerian society at the edge of identity change. To explain, when Gwarimpa returns home after a long absence, he becomes displeased with the native life style. He gets repulsive of the animal smell in his house's yard animals, like the billy goat. He could not cope with his previous life because he changed a lot due to the nature of his political work: "in that young house of his matrimony, much now displeased Gwarimpa, not least of all the pungent smell of the billy goat they were fattening in the yard as a gift for his mother-in-law's sixtieth birthday" (p.1). It is clear, here, that Gwarimpa does not like his native life style. This means that he changed according to the postcolonial political norms imposed upon Nigerian. As a result, his changing attitude indicates his identity change. Being influenced by politics, his change incarnates the Nigerian transitional identity change. That is, when he is displeased with his native social life style, he could not go along with his native social traditions, and his wife quarrels with his describing him with these words: "at the last query, a delicate arm tensed on the purse in the armpit but Sara laughed with an irritation that came naturally to spouses in her situation. 'You should hear how silly you sound, Gwari?' (3). In this way, the story unravels the colonial peculiarities of the Nigerian postcolonial society which is affected by the colonial domination; whereby its "postcolonial identity is dialogic i.e., it exemplifies the author's implied message in the narrative text and the characters' explicit voice which describes the social state of affairs in the master and slave circumferences" (Abu Jweid, 2022c, pp.7-8).

In this way, the setting of Nigerian time and place is a stereotype of pan-African socio-political matters. Nwokolo's motive is the social change of his Nigerian national identity caused by family disintegration and postcolonial political system that left its impact on the whole social life. Thus, Nwokolo chose this native setting to reveal the radical changes of the native Nigerian society through exposition, family disintegration, identity change, and postcolonial politics.

3. CONCLUSION

This study examined post-colonialism in selected short stories by Danticat, Walker, and Nwokolo. It concentrated

on the perception of African experience in postcolonial life. The study's significance lies on the way by which the native African ethnicity is influenced by the cultural and social norms of the colonized. It demonstrated how the native ethnicity could be effected by the hegemonic power. Another significance is the discussion of different postcolonial writers who share the same postcolonial experience; whereby they could accentuate the truth of colonialism and its cultural and social consequences. That is, the imperial metropolitan Hegemony left its impact upon the colonized nations that adopted some social and cultural traditions from the colonizers.

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