

Cultural Oppression and Loss of Identity Agency, Alterity and Ambivalence in Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Post-Colonial and Feminist Perspectives

Yaser Abdelhamid

MA in English, Jaipur National University

Abstract: *This study examines Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart from Post-Colonial and Feminist Perspectives. Morrison and Achebe's characters are examples of how the oppressed tinker with the well-grounded common cultural standards and norms and the newly imposed by the colonizer. This study focuses on how cultural oppression leads to identity loss in light of postcolonialism and feminism. The study utilizes Simone de Beauvoir's Theory as elaborated in her The Second Sex, and Edward Said's Orientalism. It also functions post-colonial terminology (agency, alterity and ambivalence) to best understand the influence that cultural oppression has got on the two protagonists. It is revealed that cultural and social discourses play vital roles in constructing the identity of the subject. The construction of the subject (Self-West- the White) is inseparable from the construction of the object (other, Orient, and the black). Cultural oppression has got a hegemonic control over the victimized. Reactions towards the hegemonic cultural control vary from agency, to alterity and to ambivalence. The victimized lose their true identity and in several cases their lives as a result. It is hypothesized that the two novelists deploy their styles artistically and critically to draw attention to the milieu of the oppressed under the yoke of hegemonic control of the oppressor. They also endeavor to engage the reader in putting forward a plan for emancipation and salvation.*

Keywords: Cultural oppression, loss of identity, Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe, Agency, Alterity, ambivalence

1. Introduction

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison, known as Toni Morrison, and Albert Chinualumogu Achebe best known as Chinua Achebe, are two prominent novelists and canonical authors. Both have been strong advocates and protectors of the black communities and oppressed minorities. Via their literary skills and unformidable determination. Both writers have been shouldering the liberty cause of the African-Americans on the part of Morrison and maintaining the African indigenous culture on the part of Achebe. Themes of identity, oppression, culture, feminism, colonialism and postcolonialism have been the focal point of their writings. Both Morrison and Achebe were contemporary to each other and passed away few years ago, leaving us in this volatile world struggling against the victimization and oppression—very much like the protagonists in their novels. Reading Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye* “give[s] riveting insights into the painful lives of her black protagonists as they confront racism in all its forms in American society (Guerin, 2005). Morrison is one of the “many writers[who] have produced fictional slave narratives. Sometimes called ‘neo-slave narratives’, these stories typically seek to depict the consciousness and culture of chattel slaves in ways the earlier narratives did not or could not, or instead examine the lasting psychological and social effects of slavery (Cuddon, 2013)”.

Like Alice Walker and Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison's main concern is her fellow black Americans and their cause; however, Morrison took a step further in her struggle as she “is the initiator of the crucial interface between postcolonialism and slavery, a relationship that has not been addressed with similar intensity” (Abdullatif, 1999).

Morrison's novels have tackled, among other issues, the reclamation of the past which has been oppressed due to slavery and its legacy. Furthermore, “Morrison's narratives register the historical experience of resistance against slavery, a theme which one finds in the works of novelists as diverse as Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Renee Green, and Louis Edwards” (1999). It is confirmed that “Toni Morrison, filled in many characters [Alice] Walker only sketches (Guerin, 2005). In short, Reclaiming the past, emancipation of the African Americans, and empowering the marginalized and voicing the un-voiced, have been Morrison's major concern. Culture oppression, Morrison argues, might lead to loss of identity and the absorbing oppressor's culture may result in “psychological forms of oppression, namely delirium and abjection” (Shima Peimanfard, 2018).

Chinua Achebe, father of the modern African literature, has a distinctive fictional realm, in which he depicts the indigenous culture of African communities utilizing the colonizer's medium of communication—English to widen the base of his reader. As a post-colonial author, in his *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tackles the “reconstructing pre-colonial societies in fiction and the related debates on nativism (Cuddon, 2013). Achebe's “historical and cultural sense of colonization gives him a distinctive place ... as a recurrent national writer” (Jweid, 2016). His oeuvre includes a bulk of literary fictional and nonfictional works that render him a writer of prestigious position among Post-colonial critics.

Achebe pays due attention to the importance of indigenous culture both before and after colonialism. His consequential work *Things Fall Apart* as Rhoads suggests “represents the cultural roots of the Igbos in order to provide self-confidence” for himself and for his people,” but at the same

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time he refers them [cultural roots] to universal principles (Rhoads, 1993)".

2. Literature Review

The theme of cultural oppression dates back to the depth of history. So much work has been done on the issue of oppression from variety of lenses and in various settings. This study focuses on the themes of oppression and identity loss from postcolonial and feminist perspectives. Both themes lie in the heart of Morrison and Achebe's literary productions. In the formers' *The Bluest Eye* and the latter's *Things Fall Apart*, oppression and identity loss seem to be recurrent. In the *Bluest Eye*, for example, Toni Morrison "effectively questions how and why a silenced character like that of Pecola Breedlove might hide behind the notion of white beauty and what the consequences of such an action would be not only for Pecola, but for the community in which she lives (Sande, 2014).

Both novels' protagonists Pecola in Morrison's and Okonkwo in Achebe's are oppressed, victimized spiritually and psychologically on the part of the former, and culturally and epistemologically on the part of the latter. Colonizer-colonized relationship has got several facets. In one sense, the colonizers (oppressors, victimizers) are depicted as protectors and saviors of the colonized, the oppressed and the victimized from their fellows. In her "Can Subaltern Speak?" Spivak offers "White men save brown women from brown men." This statement comes as a justification to the intervention of the colonizers in the Other's realms, imposing sovereignty and hegemonic control (Williams, P., & Chrisman, L. 1994). From this point one should ask if the oppressed is able to cope with such circumstances in which the colonizer imposes the norms and standards for the whole society. In other words, do the oppressed have free will to act against the victimizer? Do they act according to social standards imposed by the victimizer? Or do they act within the laws and constraints that construct their identities? Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (2007). The constructs that form the identity of any subject are in the heart of the two novels under discussion. Factors playing part in the construction of the identity of the subjects are ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan), or discourse (Foucault) (2007). The identity of the subject is constructed within the vein of these constraints.

Bhabha and Spivak, on the other hand, believe that a subject finds it difficult to break free from "the effects of those forces", but they also assert that as long as such forces "may be recognized [,] suggests that they may also be countermanded" (2007).

3. Methods

The Bluest Eye and *Things Fall Apart* will be analyzed in light of the Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Said's *Orientalism*. The oppressed victim is feminized and colonized. To understand this predicament, the researcher utilizes Simone de Beauvoir's theory as shown in her *The Second Sex*, and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. It is concluded and stated clearly in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman". In addition, the idea of the

statement is that the process of forming the human being is longer a biological factor; rather it is a consequence of what that human being experiences in his/her community and the hegemonic culture. The male protagonist in the society has to exert more effort to come to a compromise with female (*Hayat Bualuan CVSP 204 Common Lecture, 2010*)".

To elaborate further on the point of Cultural Oppression and Loss of Identity, certain terminologies and concepts are implemented as per their usage and reference in Bill Ashcroft's *POST-COLONIAL STUDIES, The Key Concepts*, Second edition Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (2007).

3.1 Agency

One term used to postulate on the theme of oppression in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is *Agency*. It means whether the Protagonists in both novels act autonomously or based on the environment of their upbringing (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Agency is an important term to show whether or not Pecola in Morrison's and Okonkwo in Achebe's are able to act and resist the oppression imposed on them culturally.

3.2 Alterity

It means "the state of being other or different; diversity, otherness. Though the term has its synonyms, *Alterity* is highly preferred over such synonymous terms because it denotes "...The possibility for potential dialogue between racial and cultural others..." (Ashcroft et al., 2007)".

3.3 Ambivalence

Ambivalence is essential to understand the psychological state of both Pecola and Okonkwo. Both are plagued with psychological traumas in their relationship with their community. Whether to internalize and absorb the colonizer's way of life [culture] or maintain and hold fast to theirs. In this sense, the term *ambivalent* is functioned in this study (Ashcroft et al., 2007)".

4. Male-Female Balance: Positioning the Self and the Other

The protagonists in *The Bluest Eye* and *Things Fall Apart* are portrayed as inferior to the hegemonic cultural norms to which both characters fail to adapt. From the very beginning of *The Second Sex*, the French feminist and activist Simone de Beauvoir summarizes the whole game of man woman (colonizer-colonized) relationship thus: "There is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman-PYHAGORAS" (5). Beauvoir's insights will reveal the hidden surprises in the life of Pecola Breadlove as a victimized girl trapped in multilayered vicious circles of oppression, subjugation and abuse.

On the other hand, Achebe's Okonkwo is "a feminized other" just like the Orient in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said's idea of the Occident marginalizing the Orient intersect

with Achebe's narrative of the Western culture marginalizing the indigenous people's culture of the Igbo.

Depicting the two protagonists as "other" in the novels entails uncovering the relationship with Self, Center or the West. Epistemologically, the other has been confined within the circle of how important the "other" is to be known. This has shifted into the "other that exist in contexts such as religion, linguistics and culture. Namely, the construction of the Self is inseparable from the construction of the other (Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. 2007). Alterity is the term that best describes this situation. It is an alternative to "otherness", however, it is better in the sense that it entails "The possibility for potential dialogue between racial and cultural others" (2007)

Internalizing the norms and getting absorbed in them is one possible safe scenario for some. For others like Pecola and Okonkwo it is not that easy and consequently they withdraw from the arena for the upcoming generation, in the hope of confronting and finally succeeding in keeping their identities intact. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, Claudia summarizes how we the audience react to the destination that Pecola finally ended in. Claudia rebuked us because:

We tried to see her [Pecola] without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her. Our flowers never grew. I was convinced that Frieda was right, that I had planted them too deeply. How could I have been so sloven? So, we avoided Pecola Breedlove-forever (Morrison, 2007).

Before this result, the oppressed goes through a long way before they reach. The "other" might feel "ambivalent" in the sense that "wanting on thing and wanting its opposite" (Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. 2007). Bhabha describes "Ambivalence" and the ambivalent colonized as having a mixture of "attraction and repulsion" with the colonizer (2007). It sounds threatening to the colonizer to bring about the ambivalent colonized. The colonizer-colonized relationship is deemed to be ambivalent as the colonizer never wishes to replicate its models as Bhabha thinks. As it is deemed to be an ambivalent relationship, the colonizer's empire is deemed to downfall due to the conflict caused within (2007).

The novels under discussion have several characters other than Pecola and Okonkwo. Yet, utilizing the protagonists from the two novels as the subject of this study is significant due to various reasons. Firstly, to keep a sort of balance in the study between the female and male components of the topic. Secondly, the two characters undergo similar oppressive circumstances in two different and distinct settings. Thirdly, both of them have the same destination, death due to lack of ability to cope with the world around. Finally, both share the suffering of their fellow individuals, female and males of the same colour and identity.

In this sense, the combination of the two writers, Morrison and Achebe in one study is valid. In addition, the combination of their two seminal novels in one study is also valid and rational. The researcher argues that no better way

to outline the themes of cultural oppression and loss of identity than studying Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This study also aspires to underscore the endeavors of both writers to "Speak for the Subalterns" and come up with a sort of new conventional generic forms that distinguishes Morrison's novels from the mainstream. Morrison's novels come as a revolt against the oppression practiced by the dominant culture against the black communities and African Americans.

In so doing, Morrison rewrites the history imposing her terms and reshaping the American literary canon. Morrison novels are characterized by the lack of resolution and as a result she breaks from the formal conventions of narration. However, it is argued that lack of resolution offers a great deal of resolutions and works as a mechanism via which Morrison engages the reader and urges for reactions (Heinert, 2006).

Morrison's Pecola is a consequential example of how culture oppression might lead to undesired consequences. Morrison's Pecola-though young, helpless and naïve-ventures to revolt against being different, being oppressed and being THE OTHER. Although many have argued that the black community should keep and maintain their own identity, they give no premises for that identity to grow and thrive. For Morrison, the society in which Pecola and her peers, Frieda and Claudia exist "seemed to be entangled in the vicious oppressive cycle of race, class and gender bias" (Ferdousy, 2019). Breedlove family, specimen of immigrants to old slaves, run under the yoke of a mythic legacy that the offspring of the slave remains slaves and of the master remains a master. Pecola by adopting the American norms of beauty and applying them to her, tries to prove that she is part and parcel of that very community in which she was born in which she is going to die. Tracing the cultural and the psychological surrounding in *The Bluest Eye*, this paper argues that Pecola is not wrong in her dreaming of being beautiful, rather she is entitled to dream and works for that dream to come true. The only fault is that Pecola is misguided by her very nativity and other's hypocrisy. The Norton Anthology of English Literature (2012) affirms that "Black immigrant's reverse colonization of the English language and of" the colonizer's way of life has been tackled over time since the inception of slavery trade up to the present time (THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, 2012). Based on this, if Toni Morrison's Pecola fails in her try to emulate, thousand if not millions of Pecola would come and manage not only to emulate other's norms but to get others to emulate their own norms of beauty and lifestyles.

Like Morrison, Achebe uses the language of the colonizer as a medium to convey his supreme message to the world. However, he seasons the language with his distinct style of writing. Both authors utilizing English in the best way to serve their ideal missions- to savior the oppressed and empowering the marginalized.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the clash between cultures is inevitable. The colonizer invades the Igbo, imposing his own norms and ideas. Such new ideas are not easy to cope with on the part of Okonkwo who falls due to his weak spirituality

and despite of his supposedly strong physicality (Nimer & Jweid, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* represent the influence that cultural oppression has got on the two protagonists: Pecola and Okonkwo. It is suggested that cultural and social discourses play vital roles in constructing the identity of the subject. The construction of the subject (Self-West- the White) is inseparable from the construction of the object (other, Orient, and the black). Cultural oppression has got a hegemonic control over the victimized. Reactions towards the hegemonic cultural control vary from agency, to alterity and to ambivalence. The victimized lose their true identity and in several cases their lives as a result. It is hypothesized that the two novelists deploy their styles artistically and critically to draw due attention to the milieu of the oppressed under the yoke of hegemonic control of the oppressor. They also endeavor to engage the reader in putting forward a plan for emancipation and salvation.

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Author Profile

Yaser Abdelhamid completed his MA in English from Jaipur National University and is now a teacher of English in Ministry of Education, Bahrain. Research interests are colonialism, feminism and African American literature.