



Quest for identity, alienation and rootlessness in post-colonial writings

Mausam Kumari

Research Scholar, Department of English, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

Abstract

This article shall put forth the post-colonial feature dealing the diasporic identities. According to Oxford English Dictionary: identity is defined as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is” but in post colonial context identity is linked to the “other” that means they recognize themselves as “us” with the existence of the “other”. Otherness is a feature to recognize identity in post colonial era. The term Diaspora is prevalent during the post-colonial literature. It deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, quest for identity. It is a literature which involves an idea of a homeland, where displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys are undertaken. Diaspora is mainly a community living in exile. Exile and alienation from one’s homeland occurs mainly due to the need for earning or living. In the process of migration from homeland the roots of ancestral land is lost and one’s quest for identity is raised. Migration from one place to another and even from one country to other country occurs in search of identity.

‘Roots’ and ‘Rootlessness’ are the important features of Post-colonial writings. ‘Roots’ conveys ideas about background, ancestors, heritage as well as race and culture, whereas ‘Rootlessness’ occurs due to loss of one’s identity. In the process of earning a better living the inhabitants lose their identity, meanwhile they gets separated from their ancestral land which results in loss of their ‘roots’.

Keywords: post-colonial, diaspora, alienation, identity, rootlessness

Introduction

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) ^[1] dealt with identity crisis. The novel portrayed the clash between Nigeria’s white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. The novelist blamed the white missionaries’ colonial rule and the invasion for the post-colonial oppressed Igbo culture.

The Whiteman 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 20)

The protagonist Okonkwo’s exile from Umuofia showed how one is forced to migrate from his homeland and being alienated from the clan. The conflict between family, culture, and religion of the Igbo tribes is found in the novel. The novel discussed how things fall apart when the beliefs and customs are challenged and how the personal identity changes for a man. Okonkwo, the leader and wrestling champion of the Igbo ethnic group of Umuofia in Nigeria is internally challenged and slowly his identity fades and is no longer recognizable by his friends or family.

V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) ^[4] with its protagonist Mr. Biswas who was transported from his homeland to different country to become indentured labour is the perfect example of post-colonial theme of exile and alienation. Mr. Biswas continually searches for the house of his own, a firm structure within which he can seek his own destiny. The house of his own will symbolize his independence. Naipaul through the character of Mr. Biswas projects how an individual resists or overcomes the frustration and condition in migration. The novel traces a life from the isolated totally, rural community of the first

decade of the twentieth century through its gradual contact with a larger society.

Mr. Biswas frustrated by his family hates the society which limits his opportunity. His frustration starts from his own family which is a part of society and continues to trouble him in the form of social norms. He was dealing with two kinds of frustrations both internally as well as externally. Internal frustration was due to the challenges to fulfill personal goals and desires. External cause of frustration involves conditions outside the individual, such as blocked roads or a difficult task. In the process of possessing his own house he leaves his ancestral land and becomes alienated and frustrated from his life.

Everything he now saw become sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road... so that by merely, looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and past. (Naipaul 66)

Question of identity is almost important in all the characters of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). Characters have the idea of who they are: they are the extensions of one another. They resemble a whole being when they are together. But on learning more about the world around them, they take themselves on alternate identities and considering themselves as someone else. The novel represents the identity crisis faced by the women living in different strata of the society. Women are forced to remain unrepresented and unheard. There was gender discrimination in a men dominated patriarchal society where women have a very little share in the total happiness of the family. Ammu, who is a victim of the conventional society which doesn’t allow a woman to hold her own, experiences a fragmented identity. With the passage of time Ammu became a virtual social outcaste alienated from her home, family and society.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899)^[3] is another e.g. of identity and alienation. In the course of the quest, the hero of the romance confronts hostile forces which appear unexpectedly and often in disguise. Conrad's 'umbrellas' the different types of identity within a novel, created a vast array of characters that all hold diverse identities. The two characters Marlow and Kurtz illustrate the theme of alienation. Marlow strikes as a lonely figure from the beginning. He is differentiated from the others. However, Kurtz alienates himself from the Africans as well as Europeans in order to procure ivory so that the company makes profit. The struggle for one's soul and individual humanity is one of the themes which directly relates to the theme of alienation. Marlow as a character senses his inevitable isolation from humanity. He states: "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream – alone. (Conrad 2224) Marlow examined people are distinctly hallowed. He described the General Manager as "papier-mache Mephistopheles, and seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing but a little loose dirt, maybe" (Conrad 41). The native Congolese lack their identity. Marlow describing Congolese doesn't call them humans instead choosing to describe the natives as "black shapes" or "black shadows" or "bundles of acute angles". This took away the identity of Congolese and even perceived as humans. "Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up" (Conrad 32). *Heart of Darkness* ultimately presents a story of utter isolation and alienation from humanity and from the self.

The Theme of alienation runs deep at the core of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)^[5] by Jean Rhys. Theme of alienation is found in first two parts of the novel. First two parts are narrated by two central protagonists, both of whom experience and deal with alienation in different ways. First part being narrated by Antoinette Cosway, which helps the reader understand her subsequent decline into madness. Physical, social and emotional alienation in her childhood are shown to be at the root of her insanity. Antoinette is separated from the world which is shown from her frustration which she shares of being rejected by 'negros' who called them 'white cockroaches'. Her alienation is again demonstrated by her lack of self-awareness, which in turn indicates her little sense of identity. In the second part Antoinette's husband is the narrator who is also alienated from his cultural group. But Antoinette's alienation is expanded to the wider extent than that of Rochester's; this could be because she was considered mad without any "reason". Hence, alienation is a key motif of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is presented in many ways.

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) also showed the identity crisis of the central figure Salim, an individual of Indian descent living in Africa. African public tried to recover from the colonial onslaught on their bodies and minds. They tried to build comprehensible social structure that can bring African lives to normal. Salim, himself tried to find a place in the social structure of Africa. Throughout his quest for identity Salim is reminded that he is not an African man but an outsider. Identity crisis also played an important role in the lives of native Africans. Colonialism dismantled the traditional social and cultural systems. Africa

is left ruined after colonial rule. Salim in order to become native aligned with the government. Government snatched his land and possession and he was forced to leave the country.

The Inheritance of Loss (2006) by Kiran Desai experienced identity crisis in the era of Globalization. Globalization brought ultra-modern era with some serious issues like identity crisis, question of nationality, transnational identity and social belongingness etc. This novel is best example of identity and cultural loss among the people who followed western culture blindly. Kiran Desai has portrayed the life of people living in their own dilemma of identity and belongingness due to the influence of western dogma or principles. Almost every character lost their ancestral roots at the hands of western culture. Judge lost his wife and respect of his parents because of their western look, Sai lost her love due to western etiquettes, Biju lost his pride in America, Gyan lost Sai's love because of not accepting her western look. Character's loss of ancestral roots gives the novel perfect resemblance to its title.

Globalization in the novel put forth a question of the existence before the masses. Kiran Desai has presented the Indian's fondness towards the white skin through the character of Judge who put white powder to look western "white powdered wig over white powder face". (Desai 32)

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie showed an image of what Nigeria was before the Civil War. Nigeria and its people prospered in its early years. The book exploited a weakness in the country weakness was identity and showed how the weakness divided the people. The novel showed that the country never had an identity even after gaining Independence. There was a lack of identity among the people and the leaders themselves. The unified identity lacked so this led the easterners left out of the country's politics, with the same feeling northerners come to despise the easterners. The novel showed the main reason behind the Civil War was not only hatred but also lack of identity was a huge factor.

Conclusion

The Post-Colonial literature themes of alienation, exile, confusion of identity, search for the self are profoundly found in the works discussed above in this article. It involves the discussion of experiences such as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender and place as well as responses to the discourses of imperial Europe.

References

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