



Construction of Women's Identity through Language and Culture in Postcolonial African Literature: A Case Study of Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>This paper investigates how Achebe constructed the female identity of Nigerian people through Language and culture. Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" is a cultural study of Ibo society, full of local words, phrases, and proverbs. The Ibo male is masculine and dominates the women by using strong masculine words, and they even beat their women on a tiny issue. The researcher has studied the factors that are responsible for constructing women's identity in the novel and how and in what ways are Language and culture responsible for constructing women's identity in the novel Things Fall Apart. The researcher gets some help from the difference theory of Tannen (1990) and Stuart Hall's theory (1997), which says that there is a strong relationship between Language, identity, and cultural difference. The researcher tries to prove that the Ibo society is traditional, a masculine culture, and women are considered tools to raise children and help their men earn bread and butter. The women of Nigeria are mute, calm, nice, polite, and gentle. They show the real traits of their gender. However, the male gender seems to be more dominant in every part of the world. In the novel, we find a huge kind of gender difference in the Language of men and women. Men are dominant, whereas women are deficient. It is qualitative research, and the source of the data is the text of the novel Things Fall Apart.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

The present research paper studies how women's identity is constructed through Language and culture in postcolonial African literature with particular reference to Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart." The concept of identity is difficult to unfold because of its changing nature and properties. As Hall (1997) states, "It is a fluid phenomenon, constantly moving and changing according to time and space." Hall (1997) argues that "we should not look for identity as something that has been completed, fixed and settled." He argued that "cultural identities undergo constant transformation" (Hall, 225). It is interesting to note that it is the Language that constructs identity, like personal identity, social identity, religious identity,

masculine identity, feminine identity, etc. According to Norton (1995), “Identity is fundamentally asserted through communication patterns.” Post-structuralists also assert that identities are subject to change. They are not static but in flux. Identities can be a contradictory and fractured form (Sarup, 1996). In short, identity is constructed and reconstructed during a conversation.

Language is a complex phenomenon, and so is the culture and the identity. We need a language to communicate our ideas, feelings, passions, cultures, and even identities to one another. Language, culture, and identity are closely interrelated. To understand these phenomena, we should first understand what these three concepts are. The main feature of Language is its relation to meanings. Hall’s (1997) research articles on Language, culture, and identity opened a new avenue in the field of research. As Hall (1997) states, “Language is an advantaged system in which we ‘make sense’ of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged.” But how does Language generate meaning? As Hall (1997) explains, “Language is a complex system of signs and symbols – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas, and feelings.” Hence, via representation, meaning can be produced and circulated in culture and even across cultures. So, language is not the property of the sender or receiver, rather it is a shared cultural space, where meanings take place. (Djité, 2006).

The next important phenomenon is the culture. Culture is the most significant achievement of human beings. According to Hall (1997), culture means “a way of life or shared values.” It is the name of values and practices one has to do in life. Culture is what you are, the way you live, the way you perform religious duties, the way you eat, the way you dress up, and most importantly, the way you feel towards life and society. In short, what is around you and what is in you is called culture.

The relationship between language and cultural differences can be described by discussing the effect of culture on language. Language is derived from the culture. According to Hall (1997) meanings cannot be described without cultural context. Stone is just a rock or meaningless until an artist transforms it into a piece of art. So the stone “HAJR-A-ASWAD” is just a stone for Christians, Jews, and Hindus, but for Muslims, it is a stone from heaven, and to kiss that stone is a desire of every Muslim. So, this stone has an identity (Hall, 1997). In the same way, Identity is formed and constructed by language and culture (Hall, 1997). He compares Language with a mirror through which one can see one’s changing identity. He gave an example of a football match in which every spectator was wearing a different dress hat and painted their faces with flags, etc. That reflects their national identity (Hall, 1997). “Culture and identity are closely connected.” Differences in cultures and customs construct identities. Men and women live in the same society, dealing with different people at the same time, facing different cultural norms, reflecting different attitudes, and also experiencing different uses of Language with different people at different times (Hall, 1997).

The world in *Things Fall Apart* is an endocentric world where man is everything and woman is nothing. In domestic terms, women are a part of men’s acquisitions. Okonkwo, the hero of the novel, is very aggressive and short-tempered. Okonkwo says to one of his clan’s men, a woman, in a humiliating way, “This meeting is for men, not women” (Achebe, 2003). Women are neglected, exploited, and degenerated. Their fate is no different from the destiny of other women elsewhere in the world, who, too, lived in traditional societies. This study deals with how Achebe constructed women’s identity through Language and culture.

The objectives of the study are:

To find out those factors that constructed women’s identity in the novel,

To find out how Language and culture are both responsible for the construction of a woman's identity.

Research questions

What are the factors that are responsible for constructing women's identity in the novel *Things Fall Apart*?

How and in what ways are Language and culture responsible for constructing women's identity in the novel *Things Fall Apart*?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is the set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group. According to Hall (2002), a child is born with so many identities. For example, If a child is born into a Muslim family, people will call him a Muslim; if he is born into a Christian family, people will call him a Christian; in the same way, if a child is born in America, people will call him American, and if a child is born in Pakistan, people will call him Pakistani. So, a national identity and a religious identity are born with a child. According to Mbarachi (2014), "naming is social and cultural practices that express a relationship between language and culture." Similar ideas are expressed by the researcher Deluzain (1996) that "naming is a universal process that differs from culture to culture and how the names are given is also a social and cultural process." Norton (2000) also expressed the same idea and agreed with Hall's (2000) ideas that "one can have different identities; some are socially constructed, and some are automatically constructed." Likewise, in the workplace, people perform the roles of manager, supervisor, accountant, colleague, etc. Interaction with different people who belong to different cultures and identities may lead to different hybrid and complex identities. (Norton, 2000). People moving from one country to another formed hybrid identities. Collier (1997) states that "identities formed when communication started with different cultural groups." So, in short, we have personal identities, social identities, national identities, workplace identities, religious identities, cultural identities, etc. According to the researchers, "language gave birth to the identities, and identities gave birth to the language." (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Ros I Sole, 2004; Shi, 2006). Hall discusses the same idea, which states that "identities as a process never completed" (Hall, 1996, p. 2).

Another very important factor that has a deep link with the use of Language is power. The novel under discussion, *Things Fall Apart*, expresses how white men exercise power to achieve their goals, i.e., colonialism and spreading Christianity (Achebe, 2003). This paper also discussed how powerful Language plays a role in constructing individual identities. We know that in the novel, after colonialism, the power is shifted from black people to white people. White people are educated and know the rules of the game. Slowly and steadily, they asserted power, built their colonies and converted the black people to Christianity. They also converted the son of the Hero, Nwoye, and named him Isaac, a Christian name. So, Nwoye's religious identity is changed. Okonkwo did not like this change, but over time, the Ibo people accepted the change for the better and were ready to change their identities. It is not static, of course. Okonkwo, on the other hand, did not comprehend the reality and committed a crime in the form of murder, which shows his impulsive nature. As a result, he has to be banished for seven years. At the end of the novel, when he realizes that he cannot stand against the white people, he commits suicide and meets his fate (Achebe, 2003). He probably forgot the Ibo proverb that "the soup that is hot should be taken slowly (Kagyang, 2016)." Hence, we can see that the Ibo society accepted the bright aspect of the white people's culture and

changed their identities. In short, they rejected the low-context culture and accepted the high-context culture (Trueba & Zou, 1994).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is qualitative. The researcher has collected the data from the novel textbook, but things fall apart. The researcher has applied the two relevant theories. These theories are the intercultural communication theory by Stuart Hall (1997) and the difference theory presented by Tannen (1990). Hall (1997), the founder of intercultural communication theory, is famous for his high context culture factors and low context culture factors. According to Hall, there are three fundamental aspects related to Language, identity, and cultural differences.

Analysis of Data

This part of the research paper deals with the presentation and analysis of data. The data were collected from the novel's textbook. So, the instrument and the source of the study is the text of the novel. The following are the original dialogues and text of the novel. After reading and analyzing the text, one can realize the condition of women and how the writer constructs their identity.

Extract 1

"Who killed this banana tree? He said. A hush fell on the compound immediately. Are you all deaf and dumb? (Achebe, 2003, p.27).

Analysis

This dialogue mentioned above is uttered by the hero of the novel, Okonkwo, who threatens his wife that you should not cut a banana tree without my permission. To cut a banana tree is not a matter of life and death, but to cut it without the permission of a husband is a matter of shame for the Okonkwo. In Nigerian culture, women even can't do anything without the permission of their husbands. According to Tannen's (1990) theory of difference, "men would like to solve issues through conflict whereas women make compromises". That is true as far as this dialogue is concerned. Spender (1980) also believes that "the world is dominated by men linguistically". A man's Language is more powerful than a woman's. This dialogue is another example of the linguistic dominance of males over women. Through this dialogue, the writer constructed the social identity and personal identity of the women of Nigeria. So one can see a clear-cut relationship between language and identity as Hall (1990) discussed in his theory. Okonkwo is harsh against his wife, but she is calm and mute. This silence and muteness construct the woman's identity that domestic women or housewives are always mute and calm. They should not use harsh Language against their husband. That's why Lakoff (1975) believes that "women are deficient".

Extract 2

"Thank you, Nma, she said. She was peeling new yams, and in a basket beside her were green vegetables and beans" (Achebe, 2003, p.30).

Analysis

This text shows that women in Nigeria are just a tool for household activity. They have nothing to do with the outer world. The only duty of the woman is to cook the food and care for the children and the husband. This shows that women are more supportive and cooperative with one another. If we judge or analyze this dialogue According to the theory of

difference by Tannen (1990) “men and women belong to two different cultures”. In this novel, the “women are more cooperative and try to build relationships with one another”. So the difference theory proves to be true. The writer successfully constructed the social identity of Nigerian women by showing cooperation and intimacy in dialogues. In this text, Okonkwo’s wife says thanks to Nma for helping her. The writer constructed the identity of women by using polite Language as Hall (1997) also suggested in his theory.

Extract 3

“Sit like a woman. Okonkwo shouted at her. Ezinma brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her” (Achebe, 2003, p.32).

Analysis

In the above-mentioned dialogue, Okonkwo threatens his daughter Ezinma to behave like a woman. Here we come to know that even a daughter cannot have a right to sit freely or according to her consent in front of her father. It shows the linguistic dominance of males over females. With the help of this text or dialogue, the writer tries to construct the masculine identity of Ibo men. As we have discussed in our introduction Nigerian society is purely a masculine society and women are just a tool to raise crops and children.

This dialogue can also be judged in the form of an order given by a father to his daughter. According to Tannen (1990), “men use more direct imperatives than women like, close the door, shut your mouth”, etc. This dialogue is also in the form of an order that, “sits like a man”(p. 22). It is not in the culture of Ibo’s to sit like a man. This text also strengthens the idea of Hall (1997) that “there is a strong relationship between language and culture”.

Extract 4

“I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story of my beating” (Achebe, 2003, p.105).

Analysis

The dialogue under discussion tells a complete story of the pain and suffering of Ibo women. The Ibo women are beaten by their husbands on a very little issue. In Ibo society, men feel proud to beat or kill their wives. Okonkwo’s wife is telling a story of her beating and suffering to her mother to find some support or help. This tells us the dominance of men over women physically and linguistically. This feminine dialogue constructed the social identity of the wife in Nigerian society. The word “yet” is often used by women, according to theorist Lakoff (1975). It is a culture of women sharing their stories with their mothers. So here the writer constructed the woman’s identity by using Language and culture. The same point is discussed by Hall (1997) in his social theory.

Extract 5

And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; Mighty tree branches broke away under them. (Achebe, 2003, p.40)

Analysis

The above-mentioned dialogue is highly symbolic. The locusts are the symbol of white people who are colonizers and they are constantly coming. The mighty tree is the symbol of the hero Okonkwo who under the influence of the white people committed suicide. Grass and branches are the symbol of traditions and culture that the colonizers will soon eat. This dialogue tells the horrible future of the Ibo people. The word “settle” is also symbolic and refers to the settling of the white people in Nigeria. Hall’s (1997) theory of intercultural

communication seems to be true here when we see that the people who belong to low context culture (Ibo people) accepted the high-context culture(white people). The hungry swarms (colonizers) have eaten the food of grass (Ibo people).

Extract 6

“All their customs are upside down. They do not decide their bride price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as they were buying a goat or a cow in the market”(Achebe, 2003, p.51).

Analysis

This dialogue is between Okonkwo and his friend Obrekia. Both discuss the customs of their neighboring town. This shows that women are like animals that one can buy or sell at any time. This is a humiliation of human beings because they are not animals but super humane. The women of Nigeria are mute, calm, nice, polite, and gentle. They show the real traits of their gender. However, the male gender seems to be more dominant in every part of the world. Here in Nigeria, we found a huge kind of gender difference in the Language of men and women. Men are dominant, whereas women are deficient. It is also a part of the Ibo culture that a groom should decide the price of the bride with the help of broomsticks. So it is a cultural norm. Hall (1997) also believes “that there is a strong relationship between language and a culture”.

Extract 7

“One day as Ezinma was eating an egg Okonkwo had come in unexpectedly from his hut. He was greatly shocked and swore to beat his wife if she dared to give eggs again”(Achebe, 2003, p.54).

Analysis

This dialogue tells us how Okonkwo was angry against his wife and daughter. His daughter was eating eggs without his father's consent. In Nigeria, females are not allowed to eat good and healthy food. If they would like to eat, they have to ask permission for that. Unfortunately, the same practice is still common in some parts of our country. This dialogue also highlighted the weak identity of women in Nigerian society. In Nigerian society, father is always in an aggressive mode, whereas the mother is in a polite mood even though they consider, “the mother is supreme.” According to Spender (1980), “the word ‘aggressive’ gives positive meanings for male and negative for female”. Aggressive female is a negative representation of females in English.

Extract 8

“That also is true. My in-law is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passes in the sky without his beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels, but all in vain” (Achebe, 2003, p.65).

Analysis

In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo is often described in terms of fire and flames. Okonkwo's nickname is Roaring Flames so, to him, fire symbolizes masculinity and power. He has only one emotion i-e anger. This dialogue is between Okonkwo and his in-laws. They believe that Okonkwo is much harsher and beats his wife like a beast. During nine years of his marriage, he beat his wife a hundred times, and now enough is enough. We settled the issue many times, but all in vain. This shows how Nigerians are harsh and cruel. According to **Tannen**

(1990), “women avoid conflict and wanted to solve their problems with compromises and negotiations”. So again, through the text of the Language the writer constructed the feminine identity of the women that they are compromising and working for the wellbeing of their family.

Extract 9

“Two years ago when she was pregnant, he beat her until she miscarried” (Achebe, 2003, p.65).

Analysis

In the above-mentioned dialogue, the writer tells us that even women are beaten by their men in pregnancy. They have no care for their wives and children. Even miscarriage is an ordinary matter for men. Again, this is an inhuman treatment. Through this dialogue, we feel that Nigerians just wanted to show their manliness and dominance by giving cruel and nasty treatment to women. This also shows gender stereotypes and proves that Hall’s social theory is correct.

Extract 10

The white man is very clever. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (Achebe, 2003, p.73)

Analysis

This dialogue is between Okonkwo and Obireka and tells the main theme of the novel Things Fall Apart. Both are discussing the white people who hold a knife in their hands and tear the customs, cultures, and identities of the Ibo people. They disrespect the people and their religion. So, everything has fallen apart. Even black people are ready to join the white people means people of a low-context culture are accepting the high-context culture. Tradition, culture, and religion are the things that hold the Ibo people together but when these things have fallen apart everything has fallen apart. This dialogue shows a strong relationship between Language and identity (Hall, 1997).

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Religion is a part and parcel of human life. Religion helps to shape the life of a man. As far as Nigerians (Ibo) are concerned, they are purely religious people. They believe in three kinds of supernatural beings, God, spirits, and ancestors. The supreme god of Ibo is Chukwu, who is powerful and provides food, wealth, rain prosperity, etc. The following dialogue shows how the writer constructed the religious identity in the novel (Achebe, 2003).

Extract 1

“The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish”(Achebe, 2003, p.22).

Analysis

This dialogue shows the religious customs of the Ibo society. During the week of peace one should not fight otherwise god will take revenge. Unfortunately, Okonkwo breaks the rules and beats his wife. One of the members of the clan told him that because you have violated the god, the god would punish the whole clan, and soon all would be ruined. The Language of the text constructed the religious identity of the Ibo people and how they are staunch

believers of the religion and the god. Hall (1997) also believes that “identity is constructed through language”.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

“Cultural identity is those attributes, behavioral patterns, lifestyles, social structures, and norms that distinguish a person from one other” (Omekwu, 2003). The novel *Things Fall Apart* is a cultural novel as we can see it in the form of wrestling competitions, fairs, yam festivals, and especially the customs of birth and death.

Extract 1

“The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan” (Achebe, 2003, p.26).

Analysis

The *Feast of New Yam* is one of the cultural events that Igbo people celebrate every year before the harvest to thank the goddess, ‘Ani’, who is the source of all fertility. This text illustrates the cultural identity of the Ibo people.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the construction of a woman’s identity through Language and culture in African literature, especially regarding Achebe’s novel *Things falling apart*. The writer has exposed social, political, religious, masculine, feminine, and cultural identities constructed with the help of language and culture. The researcher has proved that the Ibo society is traditional and women are considered tools to raise children and help their men earn bread and butter. This novel also presents the universal phenomena of the degradation of women in the world.

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