

UNREALIZED LONGINGS: IDENTITY CRISIS IN BEN OKRI AND ARAVIND ADIGA'S FICTION

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Abstract: Third world countries like India and Nigeria share post-colonial trauma on socio-economic and political level. The people of these countries seem to lose their sense of pre-colonial past and post-colonial vision of the future. They find themselves unable to belong neither to their olden culture nor to the newly acquired values. They suffer from a sense of hollowness. Cultural and economic corruption have deeply conquered their identities. Both these writers and their selected novels carry a story which is located amidst this cultural hassle. A rigorous analysis of these novels with the help of a theatrical framework of Postcolonial theory will bring new ideological apparatus on the tricontinental literary scenario. The present paper will evaluate these novels in accordance with the critical spectrum of postcolonial theory in order to trace the impact of colonialism on the lives of third world populace.

Keywords: Trauma, Corruption, Culture, Postcolonial, Legacy, Relations, History.

Introduction: The present paper focuses on to uncover insidiously hidden impact of colonialism under the surface narrative in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. This study will focus on and try to prove that postcolonial literature of tricontinental countries seems to be seen away from that colonial past but nevertheless it always carries an imprint of it.

Unrealized Longings: Identity Crisis in Ben Okri and Aravind Adiga's Fiction

The Famished Road and *The White Tiger* are situated in the societal mumbo jumbo of the post - colonial era. This time was of uncertainty and perplexity in Nigeria and India, where masses struggled to find economic security amidst of corruption and cultural haplessness. The people of the world that these novels portray, simultaneously carry the old culture of order and the new culture of chaos in both hands resulting in a confusion to distinguish their necessity of survival and responsibility to fight against corrupt system standing as a legacy of Imperialism. *The Famished Road* is a remarkable artifact of African traditional religious realism and it embraces the coexistence of pre-colonial cultural enchantment and post-colonial onslaughts of corrupted material world. It is the story of a spirit child, Azaro who remains "in-between" and is tired of "coming and going" (Okri 5) to heavenly spirits and his parents. But he chooses to stay with his parents and amidst of colonial havoc as he says "I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it" (Okri 5). But in spite of Azaro's enchanting tale, this novel is a critique of imperial forces through a segment of symbols, characters and intertextuality. Azaro is a typical epitome of African religious credo who symbolises ancient culture pre-colonial Nigeria. He is a spiritual force in the novel and a reminder of the location of African culture that is destabilised by western power. In order to lubricate it, Okri employs a neo-traditional narrative style through Azaro which is not merely a nostalgic return to the African folktale but "it is actually a rewriting of the socio-cultural past in the present in a way that demands critical re-interpretation in anticipation of the future, since the abiku's present contains both the past and the future" (Ogunsanwo 7).

In the novel, Okri uses supernatural paraphernalia to re-interpret bewilderment of masses aroused from independence because colonialism installed a tendency in masses to remain in cultural dependence. Azaro, throughout the novel hears voices from the spirit world: "they say he is looking for his mother, for his own spirit, which he lost when the white man came" (Okri 167). Heavenly voices which Azaro hears are enchanting extracts

from African aesthetics of a bygone age which walks parallel with postcolonial corruption. Past walks with the present and it echoes in the novel again and again: “the drama of the living that only the dead can understand” (Okri 179).

Even the characters of the novel take sides. Some of them embrace the legacy of colonialism and others stand like a stone in the mayhem of it. Okri juxtaposes absolute traditions and hybridity through the characters of Azaro’s father and Madame Koto. On the one hand Azaro’s father shares the legacy with Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Like Okonkwo, he is unable to accept new values and beliefs. He is a self-made man and resists what he doesn’t like. At one point, he says to Azaro that “Go and wash your face. You are going to be my subaltern” (Okri 452). Unknowingly, he understands that his location is at the periphery and he doesn’t lose a single chance to be a central force. His constant physical onslaughts on his people are the mirror of his conscience which is crushed by imperial forces. Azaro’s father defeats multiple colonial and neo-colonial aggressors in a series of mythic battles that mix mythical solemnity with folkloric bravado. He emerges like Okonkwo, one of his kind deeply rooted in his culture. On the other hand, Madame Koto epitomises hybrid cultural values, a mixture of less native and more western. With the passage of the time, she attains more powers. Step by step she annihilates her cultural identity for the sake of economic comfort offered by westernized bars, increasingly corrupt political and economic deals. When Madame Koto throws a fantastic party or the showcase of her ameliorating powers, Azaro feels that “it was an event meant to seal her entry into the world of myths...new spaces were being created while all we saw were the mundane events of thugs” (Okri 449). So, through these two characters, Okri expresses two credos and the mixture of these credos constitutes post-colonial identity.

Okri, not only focuses on corruption as a result of imperial invasion but also on the cultural resurrection through weaving supernatural beliefs of his society in his narrative. World of Azaro lingers between supernatural life and material existence. He forces reader to switch from supernatural world to material and vice-versa unexpectedly. He is an abiku child. Usually in Africa, a child is deemed an abiku when it is born to a woman who has had repeated miscarriages or children who die at a young age. The child who finally survives is called an abiku because it is believed to be the same spirit that tried to be born as the other children. Such reluctant spirits become abiku spirit children when they finally develop the will to choose life, so parents often perform rituals or do special favours. Okri greatly extends the narrative action of his fiction to include mythical journeys, intense dreams, and other African rituals or rites of passage. All this is done to effectively redirect his narrative strategy to minimize the significance of the colonial master and maximize the experiences of abiku the postcolonial subject. Instead of focusing on the colonial destruction of traditional African societies and cultures, therefore, he draws attention to their survival, albeit a precarious survival often lived on the threshold between life and death. Even though Okri remains keenly aware of the tragic destruction that colonialism continues to impose on traditional African societies, he refuses to let his characters admit defeat. He rejects the claim that colonialism has conquered, is conquering, or ever will conquer the deeper mysteries of the African spirit. By making his protagonist a spirit-child who chooses to live, Okri suggests that the African spirit can survive the seemingly endless cycles of colonial and neo-colonial violence by choosing to reconcile its spiritual and physical dimensions.

This novel is postcolonial in some important ways. It is postcolonial in the normative sense of resisting western global dominance and aiding the reasons of decolonisation and culture affirming nationalism. As Hawley puts in “In Okri, the western dilemma of the dissolution of the subject is celebrated” (Hawley 36). This novel is a halt on the legacy of native neo-colonial mentors who nurture corruption and their masters’ imperial will.

The Famished Road is a smooth read but *The White Tiger* is a savage novel penetrating deep into rotten and corrupt Indian psyche. It traces the absolute acceptance of corrupt system by Indians overtly and their longing for their bygone time and culture covertly. The social reality that Adiga portrays in his novel is the division between the rich and the poor. This division is however, not an unadulterated one. It is a relationship of power where the rich exercise absolute power over the poor. Such a hegemony is the characteristic of systemic corruption, an offspring of colonialism. His is a journey from “Darkness” (Adiga 15) to light.

Kevin Rusby, in *The Guardian* calls Adiga’s characterisations as “Dickensian grotesques” (Rusby) because nearly all the characters of the novel from Storks to villagers, all were stratified according to their economic and social statures as it is done in Dickens’ novels. As the story progresses we come to understand that these demarcations

work on an imperial difference of dominator and dominated. Not only this, novel functions through a series of binary oppositions like man/animal, dark/light, old/new. Novel delineates a feudal structure of society.

It is written as a series of letters to Wen Jiabao, the supposed premier of China to whom Balram Halwai, the protagonist, decides to tell the “truth about Bangalore” (Adiga 6), by telling his own life story, that is, the story of the underclass in India. It is as Balram Halwai says “sorrowful tale of how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness” (Adiga 197). Balram Halwai apparently belongs to the caste of sweet-makers as his name suggests, but the focus of the book is the class divide. That class has overtaken caste in India, in the recent, is suggested by Adiga, through Balram, who declares, “. . . in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days there are only two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up” (Adiga 64). The statement not only points to the great gulf between the rich and the poor but also reveals the dynamics of the relationship. Thus, the novel’s fulcrum is the great chasm between the rich and the poor and it is this which forms the basis of the systemic marginality of the underclass to which Balram Halwai belongs.

As I have earlier stated that novel functions through oppositions and symbols, Balram is a symbol of “half baked man...and human spider” (Adiga 52) constructed by unequal distribution of wealth and values. According to Balram every poor is locked inside a “Rooster Coop” (Adiga 175) and it is maintained by a few rich people as he says “Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent” (Adiga 175). But Adiga depicts one significant thing about India that whosoever breaks this coop becomes the one who creates it and Balram do so by murdering Mr.Ashok and becoming a corrupt rich man as his masters were while he was a driver for them. India has become a franchise of corruption, it has become a great “Rooster Coop.”

The White Tiger is not only a catalogue of various tenets of corruption but it is also a work of literature because it follows the norms of language in its usage of symbols. Holy River Ganga is made a symbol of darkness as Balram thinks that areas located around Ganga are dark places. Ganga produces darkness of soul and body as he says after breaking out from the Rooster Coop “Have I not succeeded in the struggle that every poor man should be making the struggle not to take the lashes that your father took, not to end up in a mound of indistinguishable bodies that will rot up in the black mud of the Mother Ganga?” (Adiga 318).

So *The White Tiger* is a savage treatment of Indian culture and its remains of Colonialism like corruption and cruelty and it breaks all the traditional norms of this genre as Toral Gajrawala observes in her article: “the novel breaks with realist traditions of representing poverty and backwardness in Indian Anglophone literature...drawing from same sources of anger and angst as much of realist literature, Adiga fashions a new voice which is unfamiliar and unsettling in its revolt” (Gajrawala 1).

Both these novels work on the same platform but their style, technique and setting is different. These novels are post-colonial in time and postcolonial in nature as these novels carry a segment of modern situation of once colonised countries examining newly constructed and corrupt identity of people of third world countries.

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