
HYBRID IDENTITY IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S *VILLAGE VOICES* AND *SONGS OF THE MARKETPLACE*

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Abstract:

Ethnic and social differences have continued to manifest in postcolonial African countries often leading to great animosity and bloody clashes. This paper has used Homi K. Bhabha's ideologies of difference and hybridity to study selected poems from Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* and *Songs of the Marketplace*. Such a study is important in order to bring to light the underlying political, ethnic, cultural, religious and social differences reflected in contemporary Nigerian literature and the effects of colonialism on individual private and public experiences. The researchers have applied deconstruction of discourse to the selected poems in order to cancel the binary opposition created by the apparent reflection of difference and to bring out the liminal situations that lead to what Homi Bhabha has called hybrid identity. The analysis of selected poems has shown that postcolonial Nigeria is suspended in a liminal space where traditional differences have been dissolved giving way to unrecognizable characters whose actions and inactions have helped to create a third class of hybrid characters.

Introduction:

Postcolonial nations often suffer from the inability to resolve age-old differences in a 'modern' world because the coming of Europeans into Africa brought a lot of changes to the people's way of life and caused the native to react in different ways to the disruption of their lives. These changes are reflected in the religious, educational, political and linguistic areas of life and produced individuals who found it difficult to straddle the two different worlds – European and African. The effects of this clash of cultures are portrayed in literary works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old man and the Medal*. The negative effects of colonialism are also depicted in the works of the Negritude movement and

necessitated the demand for a change to the status quo. Many years after political independence, one continues to see that African writers are still preoccupied with the vision of change. As Terry Eagleton observes:

Literature, we are told, is virtually engaged with the living situations of men and women. It is concrete rather than abstract, displays life in all its rich variousness, and rejects barren conceptual enquiry for the feel and taste of what it is to be alive (170).

This observation is true because in Africa (where a great number of former colonies are found), the people continue to suffer under different oppressive administration and their earnest desire remains change for the better. Thus, the writer must fulfill his assigned role

of watchdog and visionary by doing what Chinyere Nwahunanya calls “expressing his sincere observations of society's failing and pointing the way forward in the right direction” (381).

Theoretical Framework

This research paper will adopt Homi K. Bhabha's strand of postcolonial theory with special emphasis on the ideologies of difference and hybridity. What is traditionally known as 'difference' arises from the knowledge that the developed races of the world look down on the less developed races and have attached certain myths to them in order to make them appear inferior but Homi Bhabha postulates that at the point of interaction between two groups of people, that a space is formed where individuals whose original identity have been altered inhabit. It is within this space that the hybrid individual can be located (p.5). Hybridity therefore becomes more important than the age long difference which according to Bhabha can no longer be identified in a globalized world.

According to Homi Bhabha in Introduction to *The Location of Culture*, difference arises from the national or global minority right to speak from the periphery and it is the absence or negation of minority groups from the centre that brings about this enquiry or “supplementary” questioning of “Who am I” (xxv). Bhabha makes us understand that if the centre had not, in its glorification of the fetishistic, 'othered' the minority groups, there would have been no need for those “supplementary” questions. The “global village” and the modern nations could have been viewed as one homogenous entity. This means that difference which is articulated by race, gender, class, and the political orientation of the participants of a discourse situation, gives the people at those extremes the power to be heard. The absence of the “archetypical” characteristics in an individual, in the ethnic group or in the social class from which that individual comes leads to the “othering” of such a one

(107).

Bhabha goes ahead to explain that the question of the “Other” is brought about by the consciousness of the “past which is crucial to the argument – 'as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person’” (69). This means that an individual becomes an “Other” because a past action or experience has excluded him from the widely held view or belief. This “Other” could have also “inherited” what Fanon sees as “the long years of racial prejudice due to the colour of his skin” (84).

Homi Bhabha's ideology of hybridity injected new ideas into postcolonial discourse and gave a redefinition of what constitutes postcolonial criticism. According to Bhabha:

The centre of such a study (postcolonial) would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures, nor, the universalism of human culture, but a focus on those 'freak' social and cultural displacement...the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present. (18)

What Bhabha means here is that postcolonial criticism should not continue looking at only the clash of Western and Oriental cultures and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, it should rather shift focus to the problems of those nations that have gained political independence but are still unable to make progress due to some problems inherited from their colonial masters.

According to Homi Bhabha, colonialism brought so many changes that affected both the colonizer and the colonized and has led to what he calls an ambivalent situation where both groups benefit from one another and the binary division is suspended in an “interstitial passage” (5). Bhabha's ideology of hybridity arises from this relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. These groups of people therefore, form a third class where it is no longer possible to identify where they had come from. This third class created is a liminal group suspended in a formative

process at what Bhabha calls “moments of historical transformation” (3).

Liminality is a word taken from anthropology and it refers to the quality of ambiguity or confusion that occurs in the middle stage of rituals when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete (“Liminality”). Arnold van Gennep who developed the idea of liminality in the twentieth century regards it as a universal concept because, according to him, every society passes through such a period in its contact with another. Examples of liminal rites, according to anthropologists, are rites of passages from childhood to adulthood found in so many cultures of the world, baptism (for the Christian faith) and religious pilgrimage – which members of different religious faith engage in.

However, societal liminality could become extended when the participants in a rite of passage fail to emerge from the liminal experience into the larger society within the set time for the ritual. When this happens, according to Rene Girard, liminality produces “undifferentiated monsters – the unsavory agonistic side of community” (qtd. in “Liminality”). Homi Bhabha himself explains that the colonial experience in India for example, and in many other societies is a liminal situation that destabilized long ossified cultural systems and made both the colonizer and the colonized, copies of the other. This liminal experience has been prolonged because the leaders of the “new nations” have turned into tricksters who are mistaken for real heroes. These tricksters turned leaders, while fitting Fanon's definition of post-independence leaders who have failed to share with their people the benefits of self-rule, have then taken the people for a ride at the expense of their own comfort (133).

Bhabha's comparison of postcolonial societies to liminal *communitas* is relevant because colonialism came to pre-colonial

societies like an emergency situation – the nations affected were not prepared for the changes accompanying the experience. Hence, many of the former colonies have not been able to come out of this experience with the right sense of identity and self-assurance. As a matter of fact, self-appointed leaders who hijacked the communal experience and made it their own have created an atmosphere of perpetuity to the liminal condition thereby reaping self-aggrandizement at the cost of the larger society. Therefore, hybridity in such liminal nations is a continuous process with no end in sight and the citizens – all hybrid characters – continue to search for the right way through the maze into which the colonial experience has led them.

Hybrid identity in Osundare's *Village Voices*

Osundare's *Village Voices* is a collection of poems which looks at the effects of postcolonial leadership on the rural dwellers. “The Prisoner's Song” (pp. 24-25) bewails the condition of life in the society by using the analogy of prison life. However, the prisoner looks beyond his condition and sees a relationship between him and his jailer. Thus:

You who flog others
 into cages like chicken...
 Look round your barn
 and behold this harvest of
 chains
 in which every belted
 bootman
 is an iron link. (ll. 6-15)

The apparent difference which exists between the ruler and the ruled (represented by the prison warder and the prisoner) is made prominent by the use of words like “flog”, “cages”, “key”, “chains”, “padlocks”, “gate”, “steel”, “bastions of barbed wire” but beyond this “othering” by the representatives of the ruling class, the persona describes a space of liminality where both the oppressor and the

oppressed are made one. Thus:

We are prisoners both
 In this graveyard of freedom
 Boots and brass buttons
 Are flimsy costumes
 In this drama of oppression
 (ll. 24-28)

“The Land of Unease” (pp. 45-46) describes the situation in the postcolonial nation where many are left to starve while a few take away the resources meant for all.

The yam of this world
 Is enough for all mouths
 Which pay daily homage
 To the god of the throat (ll. 4-
 S7)

The persona explains that the ruling class has forged “unequal knives” that enable them to slash the yams greedily leaving “peelings” for others.

Difference comes out in this poem in the way the persona uses his words. “unequal knives”, “machetes greedier than Esimuda’s sword”, “bellies bloated by excess” portray a class of people whose greed has made them acquire so much wealth to the detriment of the masses who are regarded as “omodindinrin” at the periphery of the palm”.

However, the opening lines of the poem promise unease for both the “thumb” and the “little finger” because when there is no peace in the land, no one will be spared. Therefore, in “The Land of Unease”, the ruling class and the ruled are brought into the same liminal space where peace eludes all. The common act of eating draws both the big and small, rich and poor, young and old into one space because everyone is involved in it.

In “Unequal Fingers” (pp. 60-61) the difference between the ruler and the ruled is made manifest by the title “Unequal Fingers”. Saying that fingers are not equal means condemning some people to a life of poverty while a few grab and enjoy the resources. Thus: “we have known famished months// and years of unnatural famine” (pp. 4-5) shows that food inadequacy is man-made with the aim of keeping some people in a subservient position forever.

The juxtaposition of the poor people’s quarters with that of the “Senior Service” confirms that two worlds have been created in the postcolonial nation where the haves and the have-nots inhabit.

Somewhere, not more than
 A hungry shout away
 Chicken legs dance
 At the bottom of simmering
 Spots. (ll. 18-21)

The persona goes ahead to explain why the palm has unequal fingers. These unequal fingers represent the different classes of people found in the society.

For we know
 How the thumb grew fatter
 Than all the others
 The funds for our community
 centre
 Built your palace
 The funds for our rugged
 roads
 Bought your car
 The funds for our water
 scheme
 Irrigate your banks in Europe
 (ll. 30-38)

The poem thus, exposes the fact that class difference is man-made and can be reversed if the ruling class will rise up to their responsibility to their followers.

Hybrid identity in *Songs of the Marketplace*

“Excursions” (pp. 7-15) is a poem that indicts every member of the society and blames them for the ills befalling the nation. The poem is written in four parts – the first part x-rays poverty across the land (from the rural area to the city fringes), the second part questions the need for alms-giving in a land of abundance; the third part brings every member of the society into the marketplace of the world full of troubles and cares and the fourth part touches on the effects of corruption on the ivory tower and talks about the wicked ruler whose high-handedness has brought about untold hardship to the masses. The level of difference manifested in this poem is aggravated by the fact that a line has been drawn between the “government people” and the masses; the “tough-biceped” and the “soulless foremen”, the starving congregation and the “plump preacher” and the poor masses and the rich politician.

However, the binary opposition created by the difference between these different groups is resolved by the fact that they are all brought into one liminal space. Hybridity manifests in the poem as one can see in the following lines:

These sightless sockets
 Burn indictory gazes into
 Heavy pockets
 And vaults of hoarded loot
 These swinging stumps
 Are pointers to
 The skull behind our
 corpulent grins. (p. 15)

“The Skull” which lies behind every fleshy

façade clearly shows that both the haves and the have-nots are doomed to the same fate – death and decay. This comes more alive when one considers the persona's warning in the last stanza of the poem – “the oppression's cloud will clear// the sun eastering hence// a life full and free” (p.15)

“Sule Chase” (pp. 16 - 18) portrays a world inhabited by men and women who are eager to extinguish the fires of corruption before it spreads. The vigour with which the mob killed Sule, a three-kobo-loaf thief, presents it as a representative of a society, a people who has zero tolerance for crime. The difference between Sule and the mob therefore, is clearly evident from the beginning of the poem.

However, the persona interestingly shows that each individual that participates in the chase deserves the same treatment which has been meted out to Sule. Thus:

Tailors with giant scissors
 Permsecs with PENDING files
 Barristers with dusty wigs
 NEPA experts with fused bulbs
 Telephonists in dead head-sets
 The doctor with a coughing stethoscope
 The don with his chair aloft
 The sergeant just gone to inspect
 His tenth mansion... (pp. 16-17)

This infamous chase of a hungry thief creates a liminal space for thieves who ordinarily would not have been identified as such. Unfortunately, these bigger thieves who murder Sule for taking a three kobo loaf are not apprehended. This clearly shows that the society overlooks important issues and pays

attention to irrelevant matters. The mob that gathers to kill Sule is made up of thieves who have failed to do the work for which they are paid but they do not hesitate to kill a man who has been forced by the inefficiency that abounds in the public service to help himself to a small loaf.

“Siren” (pp. 21-23) exposes the wickedness of the ruling class. The poet persona exposes how the ruling class “others” the masses by evoking the siren to claim right of way. Unfortunately, the police force and members of the ruling party are employed to enforce the order of separation and to keep the masses in their own place. Thus:

Siren Siren Siren
 Police acrobats on
 motorbikes
 Wielding whips with
 consummate dispatch
 The road must be cleared at
 once
 For which worthy ruler
 Ever shares the right of
 way (ll. 1-6)

Despite the fact that these people have been invited to come and cheer their ruler as a way of showing their solidarity to him, this same ruler is seriously bent on alienating himself from the masses by choosing not to see the pitiable condition of the people and by refusing to hear their cries for a better living condition. The different classes of people created by this arrogant display of power are converged in a space – where all become deaf or blind to the other's words and condition. Thus:

Siren Siren Siren
 And buntings and banners
 And brazen bombasts
 Their Excellencies love
 the sound of words. (ll. 33-
 37).

The use of “brazen bombasts” clearly shows that the ruler fails to communicate to

the masses. This breakdown in communication, caused by the ruler's refusal to reason with the masses, reduces the “State Visit” to a useless jamboree. Thus, the visit comes to an end leaving behind questions whose mere existence threatens the future.

Conclusion

The existence of difference in postcolonial nations is always interesting due to the fact that it helps bring out a beautiful panorama of hybrid identities and exposes the fact that there is no real difference as every member of the society now shares many things in common. The liminal situation which exists in postcolonial societies can only be resolved if and when the effects of colonialism are removed from these societies. Until then, questions of “who am I ” will continue to be asked without any answer in view.

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