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The Conflict of Identity – A Study of *My Place* and *Things Fall Apart*

Debarshi Ghosh

Research Scholar, Techno India University, West Bengal, India
Email: debarshighosh1999@gmail.com

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Abstract

*Identity is a fluid concept that is prone to changes, depending on the socio-political conditions one may find themselves in. This aspect finds its presence in the canon of World Literature – documenting the experiences of the natives as well as the events of colonial invasion. The invasion also brought about a cultural clash and the natives had to face alienation, displacement as a result. Identity issues have been discussed by scholars like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha - where they have tried to analyse the undercurrents of colonialism which shapes the Identity and influences it in various ways. This paper aims to provide an insight into the issues of identity with critical analysis of Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Morgan's text gives the perception based on discrimination, whereas, Achebe reports the story of the cultural clash. The paper aims to highlight the issues related to the identity of a community and analyse how the protagonists in the above-mentioned works were affected by identity issues and how they dwelt with the same.*

Keywords: *Identity, colonial, clash, discrimination, perception.*

Introduction

In simpler terms, World literature comprises literary works produced around the world and which have been accepted by the global audience. According to David Damrosch, World Literature involves a change of dynamics of relation between “literary history and cultural power” (2003, p. 530). Johann Wolfgang Goethe's views on this arena in the early 1800s were critical in the shaping up of World Literature as an important area of academic study. He theorized the term Weltliteratur for the first time in 1827 in this context (What is World Literature, n.d.). The study of World Literature should be encouraged, as through it one would get to know not only about the culture, language, way of living of people of various areas around the

world, but also the past events which had shaped their lives to a great extent. The works written in the regional languages began to be translated in English, allowing them to reach a wider audience, which in turn made them popular. The role of translation is hence, quite important for the development of World Literature.

Contemporary World Literature is connected to the identity issues. Identity is referred to the characteristics one desires to have to fit into a group or a place. Identity also means the way how a person sees himself or herself. Gender, Race, society and so on all participate in shaping our identity. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) respectively deal with the issue of identity crisis, which is closely

tied with the colonial invasion and the subsequent events following the same. However, its influence on the identity of the people is not uniform. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) and Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) – have discussed the influence of colonialism in the context of construction of identity and their arguments are relevant to understand the texts of authors in this field (Dizayi, 2019, p. 80). The texts under the canon of Contemporary World Literature plays an important role to counter the narratives set up by the colonial masters regarding the natives and their prejudices and bring out the truth regarding their real-life experiences. The texts also represent the internal issues, customs of the natives, the aboriginals which further complicates the identity clash amongst themselves – leading to a self-versus other conflict. The Migration, Cultural clash, Wars – all these had a direct impact on the construction of the identity of the oppressed community by the oppressor. With a study of texts *My Place* and *Things Fall Apart* in this regard the paper would try to develop a better understanding about identity as a concept along with an investigation about the undercurrents which are at work in shaping a particular aspect of identity -with the help of the postcolonial theories and understand the difference of attitude portrayed by the protagonists – real life Sally and fictional character Okonkwo respectively while dealing with their own respective identity crisis.

Literature Review

The issue of subjugation of the natives in Australia was initiated by the arrival of Thomas Cook, who acquired some parts of Australia (Colonisation, 2020). This laid down the foundation for further expeditions and acquiring of lands in Australia. This proved to be devastating for the Indigenous communities. The arrival of Europeans brought a lot of diseases and the gradual, violent conflict between the indigenous and European groups

resulted in a significant reduction in the population of the natives (Sushila, 2021). The colonial masters eventually gained control upon their lands and exploited them physically, mentally and sexually.

Sally Morgan's work, *My Place*, has its place among the classics of Australian Biography. This book gives a voice to those, who have been exploited for too long and allowed the people to see the reality of the colonial regime. The book documents Sally's search for her true identity. Despite the major positive feedbacks, it received from people, for instance, one of the critics, Bain Attwood has stated that this book has helped to create Sally Morgan's identity, it had to face criticism too. Keith Windschuttle, for instance, questioned the authenticity of the work and refused to accept the existence of such exploitation stories (Aboriginal Identity: Sally Morgan and *My Place*, 2012).

Critical essays and research articles on *My Place* have tried to analyse the journey of Sally towards the realization and acceptance of her true identity. Apart from providing a critical view on the same, through the means of its critical reception and critics' views on this issue, the journals have aimed to justify the same with the help of textual references. The works are centred around the opinion that Sally's life experiences as well as initial non-cooperation from her family prompted her to search for her own true identity. During this, she unearths the horrors of colonialism and its effects on her family in particular and on her community in general. According to Hirokazu Sonoda, Sally was able to bring into the open the "previously hidden Australian history" to the global audience (2009, p. 158).

The Berlin Conference of 1884 became vital in the context of Nigeria – the continent got divided into several parts according to the convenience of the European forces and thus came in the divisions of the continent on Anglophonic, Francophonic lines and so on. Britain claimed control of West Africa as a

result of that conference and gradually turned Nigeria into a colony.

Things Fall Apart is considered to be one of the finest works of Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart* helped the natives develop a sense of pride over their own culture and history (Urschel, 2008). Starting with *Things Fall Apart*, the works have put forward the idea of faults within the Igbo system of belief and their inability to change with time led to their downfall. According to Jweid, Okonkwo's suicide symbolized the fall of the identity of the Igbo (2016, p.538). The colonial invasion mainly accelerated this process, as they exploited the gaps in their cultural beliefs and utilized that situation in their favour, causing the sidelining of the dominant native traditions (Whittaker & Msiska, 2007).

The novels which are being used in this paper has been written between 1960-80. Australia achieved dominion status in 1901, but it was not until 1986 when Britain withdrew its powers from Australia. Nigeria became independent in 1960. So, the novels were written at a time when the Imperial forces had lost their influence in the colonies. These stories are the reconstruction of the identity of the 'natives' – the stories were told from the perspective of the indigenous communities as a measure to counter the colonial stereotype imposed on them.

This paper aims to provide a more organized viewpoint on the identity issues in the novels involved in this work. An analysis shall be made on Sally and her family as well as on Okonkwo about the conflict between self-identity and the identity of barbarians, brutes which were imposed upon them by the colonial forces. The aim would be to understand their response to the same. The analysis shall be done with the help of the concepts provided by theorists like Edward Said, Homi K Bhabha, Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets and the study will be descriptive and comparative in nature.

Identity Amidst the Cultural Clash in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe depicts the identity issues amidst the cultural clash between the Igbo and the Colonial forces in Umuofia and its neighbouring villages. The identity crisis can be analysed through these three aspects - Okonkwo's own identity, the identity of the Igbo community and how both of them got affected, not only by the onset of colonial forces in Umuofia, but also for their faults.

Okonkwo is the protagonist of the novel. Okonkwo's life was tough. Laziness of Unoka, Okonkwo's father, was a major reason for his difficult childhood. Unoka had a lot of debts and could not even get an honourable burial in his homeland. So, Okonkwo strived to work hard to gain respect among his people and earn enough to take proper care of his family. He hated all the habits loved by Unoka. He was actually trying to come out of Unoka's shadows. Gradually, Okonkwo's condition improved. In his community, one can rise in the ranks through their hard work, which means it was not predetermined by someone's birth. In the early part of the book, the readers are made aware of his achievements at an early age. He defeated Amalinze, who was previously undefeated for seven long years. Achebe narrates:

It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights (1994, p.8).

Okonkwo exercised authority over his family. He portrayed himself as the overpowering, masculine figure, whom everybody should obey. There was also a fear within him that he may be called a weak, feminine figure. He faced an emotional trauma in his childhood, when his playmate told him that his father was *agbala*, a term which has feminine connotations (Whittaker & Msiska, 2007).

Okonkwo abstained from showing his emotions to his family members, be it to his children or his wives. He made them work hard in fields, without taking into consideration their abilities. He harmed them physically for the smallest of causes, as seen in the case of the feast of the new yam, where he beat his second wife for taking some leaves from the banana tree.

One important point in this context is that Okonkwo had three wives, which can be used to state the fact that he had a higher status in his society. His wealth had also increased and along with his military exploits and had physical prowess in wrestling. He became a person of importance among his contemporaries. This aspect came up in the settlement deal in Umofia's conflict with a neighbouring village. Ikemefuna, whom they got as a part of the deal, was made to stay in Okonkwo's house. On very few occasions only, he showed his emotions as seen in his concern for Ikemefuna or in the case of Ezinma. Thus, Okonkwo can be described as a person, who is trying to be harsh to others as well as to himself, desperately trying to hide from his past.

Although at times he was harsh, one cannot completely blame him for his behaviour, owing to the situations he grew up in. However, some incidents happened later on which made his own people as well the readers question his activities, bringing his identity into question. First, his participation in the killing of Ikemefuna, which he did just to show himself as a strong person in front of his clan members. This was unjust on his part to do so since Ikemefuna was put under his care and this initiated his moral downfall. Another one was the accidental killing of Ezeudu's son by him, for which he had to go to exile to his mother's clan for 7 years. His exile would not only lead to dramatic changes in his life but in the lives of the Igbo people in general.

Chinua Achebe's main motto in writing this novel, as mentioned earlier, was to clear the misconceptions people had about their

community and also to debunk their claims that they are the ones who had established administration, institutions over there (Özun and Başkale, 2019, p. 88). Chinua Achebe describes the way of living of Igbos through this novel. We see them having their own traditional, cultural beliefs – as seen in their reverence to their dead ancestors 'egwugwu', their belief in the concept of chi, which guides their actions (Irele, 2000). They have their rituals, they use a lot of proverbs in their conversation and have their distinct songs and folk tales, which is an integral part of their identity formation (Osomkume & Akudo, 2023). The Umofians were respected by all because of their proficiency in medical knowledge and military skill. Achebe writes:

Umofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself (1994, p.16).

But, some of their actions were debatable – like their patriarchal mindset, as seen in the way their administration delivered the judgment on the case of Mgbafo, terming her case of domestic abuse as a mere trifle, or their treatment of the weaker, disadvantaged sections of society, their beliefs regarding the birth of twins- this all proved to be their major cause of downfall.

Perhaps Okonkwo modelled his appearance to the outside world on the basis of his learnings from his family and from his community- the patriarchal mindset and the hardships of his people prompted him to create an identity for himself as a person in power, in charge of affairs of his village. According to Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "One's identities are composed of ... identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles" (2000, p. 226). Okonkwo identified himself as the head in his group and strived to portray his superiority over others, embracing aggressive

outlook as a part of his individual identity and sought validation from the same.

The above can be analysed further in the light of the advent of the Imperial forces in Umofia and other villages of Nigeria. Their first reference in the novel is where Okonkwo associates them to ‘albinos’. The ‘natives’ had certain apprehensions about them. One important point to be noticed is that the folk tales do not appear after the arrival of colonizers in Umofia- indicating a cultural and identity clash that would follow. We see the extent of their power when Obierika informs Okonkwo about the massacre which the English people carried out in Abame, wiping out the entire village. Okonkwo, from the very beginning, opposed them and in no way, was afraid of them. But this invasion of the Britishers changed his equation, not only with his family but with his community as well. This marked the transfer of power from him to the outside forces. We see the gradual spread of Christian Missionaries in Umofia, this further created differences amongst the members of the clan (Osomkume & Akudo, 2023). This also created a rift between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. Nwoye slowly became disillusioned with the practices of his clan – he was deeply saddened by the killing of Ikemefuna, at the hands of his father. So, when he started attending the religious speeches of the missionaries, he gradually got drawn towards accepting Christianity as his religion, leaving behind his own family, tradition and customs. The aspect of Orientalism comes in – where the Christians painted their customs and religious practices as inferior to the ones they were preaching. Christianity was placed at a higher plane as compared to the Native traditions, which they pointed out as soul-less and primitive. Their preachings were further helped by the gaps and faults within the Igbo system. Also, the new religion accepted the ones, who were initially considered to be the outcasts among the Igbo people. And the church too functioned efficiently in the evil forest, which surprised the local people to a great extent.

All this led to the strengthening of colonial rule in Umofia. They gradually established their own rules, customs, administration, business opportunities and ended up making the natives their ‘subjects’. Okonkwo too, fell out of favour with the local Umofians, when people questioned his actions instead of supporting them or abiding by them, as they did in earlier times. His identity was brought into conflict; he was no longer in charge. Others were gradually accepting the identity of colonized. The final nail in the coffin was put by the court messenger incident- when Okonkwo killed one of the messengers in retaliation for the harassment they faced at the hands of the commissioner and his men. But Okonkwo’s clan members did not support his action. They let the messengers escape and were not happy regarding Okonkwo’s actions. Okonkwo realized by this fact that indeed his society and life have fallen apart and committed suicide, an inglorious way of death in Igbo culture. He could not acclimatize or surrender to the growing cultural clash around him – his misplaced sense of superiority got the better of him at the end. Thus, it can be ascertained that the colonials exploited the faults of the Igbo community to establish their rule in Umofia, thus bringing the identity and the existence of the ‘natives’ under question. This explains the occurrence of culture and identity crisis or clash in this novel – both due to colonial invasion as well as by individual/group actions. In the clash between native and colonial culture – the later won as signified by the fall of Okonkwo, who did all the work to improve his way of life, let go of his past but could not go off from his own shortcomings and failed to adjust to the identity conflict around him.

Search and Acceptance of Identity in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*

The next novel under consideration is Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. This work depicts the author’s journey towards discovering and accepting her own identity. Sally’s search for

her own identity is derived from the motive of bringing forth the truth, regarding the exploitations faced by the ‘natives’ at the hands of the Britishers.

At first, one needs to analyse how Sally initially saw herself before she realized her original identity. Sally and her siblings lost their father early and she had a strained relationship with her father. It is important to note that her father was a white person, which is responsible for Sally ‘s grandmother and mother’s apprehension of the people in authority.

Sally, during her childhood, was playful, at times quiet and reserved. She did not like the school curriculum much, although she was interested in storybooks and drawing. From the very beginning, people were apprehensive about her identity, when she said that she was Indian, her friends did not seem to accept it wholeheartedly (Susila, 2021). She had to face criticism from her teacher in the early years of her school. Even her family was seen in low light. She got caught while trying to bunk school and one of the teachers commented, “We expect it of the Milroy’s, but not of girls of your calibre” (Morgan, 1987, p.108). This aspect can be interpreted through Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. The Colonial forces over the years, through expeditions, conquest and administration practices gained control over the natives. Through their writings, policies they eventually painted the natives as the ‘other’ – the barbarians who need to be civilized. They were portrayed as the outcaste, who were to be kept at the fringes of the society. According to Edward Said, “European Culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (1978, p. 3). The words of the teacher above is a reflection of the concept of Orientalism.

The major revelation comes in when Sally finally gets to know that they are blacks after all, from Daisy (Finn, 2018, p. 18). This brought in a lot of questions in her mind, about who they were and from Jill, she got an idea that

being aboriginal would ensure problems for them in the long run, as commented by Jill, “You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian, anything, but not Aboriginal!” (Morgan, 1987, p. 122)

This proved to be true, as she was humiliated by his art teacher and she was asked by a church deacon to break off her friendship with Patty, her daughter, as he considered that Sally would create a negative influence over her daughter. All of this made her take herself seriously – she started paying more attention to herself, to her academics. Her decision to take up the aboriginal scholarship was fuelled by her desire to own up to her own identity. Here too, she faced problems. Someone had complained to the education department about Sally obtaining her scholarship on false grounds. This incident becomes important, as Sally fiercely defends her own family in front of the department, protecting their reputation and honour in this process. A section becomes important where Sally tells herself:

If I denied my tentative identification with the past now, I’d be denying her as well. I had to hold on to the fact that, someday, it might mean something (Morgan, 1987, p. 178).

She decided to write a book, containing the stories and experiences of their family members. It was initially tough, with lack of co-operation from Daisy, Sally’s grandmother and Gladys, Sally’s mother, misguided by Alice and Judy about the true parentage of her mother and grandma. But due to her relentless effort, they finally managed to tell her the truth and she could come up with their stories to the public.

Now, the life experiences of Sally’s family members need to be looked at, as it would reveal the extent of an identity crisis, exploitation they faced and why their stories are worth knowing. Sally received ample support from Arthur, her uncle and Daisy’s brother. His arrival gradually made Daisy open up a bit about her life, the turning point in the novel according to the opinion of critics. Sally has documented each of the tales of Arthur, Daisy

and Gladys in separate chapters and has dedicated a chapter to their native place as well.

Their stories give the readers a lot of details about the brutality carried out on the ‘natives’ by the Britishers – be it exploitation of women, exploitation of natives, the concept of stolen generation: all can be analysed through the lives of the characters of Arthur, Daisy and Gladys.

A shocking fact came up as the stories got revealed one after another- three of them shared the same father and that too a white man. The man under question is Alfred Dreck Brockman, who had sexually exploited Daisy’s mother – and Daisy, Arthur is their children. But the fact, which makes the readers feel disgusted is the possibility of Alfred sexually exploiting Daisy and Gladys being born due to this. So, we can understand why it was tough for Daisy to come up with her own experiences as revealed by her:

I got my secrets. I’ll take them to the grave. Some things I can’t talk ‘bout. Not even to you, my granddaughter. They for me to know. They not for you or your mother to know (Morgan, 1987, p. 428).

The stories of the other characters: Gladys and Arthur enlighten us about the working of the stolen generation and the concept of a half-caste. They were half-caste, as they were born out of the union of a white man and a native woman (Susila, 2021). They were taken away from their family and sent to missionary homes, where they were given education, training to meet the needs of the Europeans and were either sent away to Christian families. Life was tough for both of them, as they were made to leave behind their own family, the tradition behind and was forced to take up a language, tradition that was unknown to them. They too had to face torture in those homes. Arthur narrates, “He didn’t care where he hit us, he just beat us and beat us till we bled. There were bits of blood everywhere” (Morgan, 1987, p. 236).

They could not claim the European masters as their fathers. So, this led to an identity crisis, where they can neither claim

themselves as a European, nor a ‘native’. It is important to mention in this regard that Sally’s father was also a white person and she could have been taken away by the authorities, as feared by Daisy and Gladys. That is why they were fearful of the authorities. Thus, their story makes it clear to the people about the need for Sally to bring forth their stories to the public and show the real face of the colonizers to the world. According to Hirokazu Sonoda, Sally eventually ended up forming a “complete sense of her identity” during the course of her Research for her roots (2009, p.165). This book is important, as it gives voice to those, whose voices were suppressed for too long.

The writing of the stories was important – it brought forth the torture and dismantled the falsities propagated by the outsiders regarding the aboriginals. This book was a third space for her as well as for her family – they imbibed the teachings, the identity of half-breed being thrust upon them but she utilized the same to create a niche space for them, challenging colonial authority. According to Homi K Bhabha, “third space... at once bar and bearer of difference, is closed to the paranoid position of power” (1994, p. 101). Her work became the space, where she challenged the colonial notions regarding her identity which she had to carry through her entire childhood. She claimed her own identity – deriving from as well as challenging her past. Instead of carrying the trauma further, she stepped up and questioned the notions regarding the identity on the basis of their colonial past and instead critiqued the same through her life writing and reclaimed her native glory, her aboriginal identity – thus reclaiming her pride.

Conclusion

In this paper, a discussion has been done on the aspect of Identity Crisis in the novels of Contemporary World Literature – concerning two novels i.e. *My Place* and *Things Fall Apart*. At first, the topic had been introduced in light of the statements of Goethe

in this context, followed by the influence of colonial forces in causing the identity issues amongst the colonized people. Later, the background events related to the novels in this project were discussed – the colonial expansion in Australia and Nigeria and so on. The writing styles of the authors were discussed and a summary was also given on the existing works, journals on the same topic of identity issues. In the discussions section, the novels were examined based on identity issues. In *Things Fall Apart*, it was the culture clash, which became the main reason for the identity crisis and downfall of the Igbo society as well as of the central protagonist, Okonkwo. Their inability to adapt to the changing times allowed the colonizers to seize control over them, causing fragmentation of trusts, beliefs within the native community. *My Place* involved the acceptance of the real identity by the protagonist as well as her family. Sally's family avoided to acknowledge their real identity earlier because of the exploitation they had to face at the hands of their colonial masters and Sally had to work hard in order to make her parents narrate the truth and, in this process, she discovered her true self. A Comparison was attempted in the difference of approach of Sally and Okonkwo regarding their respective identity conflicts and it was analysed with the reference of the concepts of Post Colonial Theory.

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Contributor

Debarshi Ghosh

Research Scholar, Techno India University,
West Bengal, India.

Email: debarshighosh1999@gmail.com