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Identity Crisis in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*

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During the years of their colonial subjugation, the colonial subjects had gotten into themselves the seed of “inferiority complex”, which in turn made them feel that white skins are superior. This psychological trauma was so intense that they tend to run away from their own individuality by imbibing the traits of their own masters, in order to be equal or to be accepted by the white community. This thirst for acceptance of the self as a human being made them lose their own ‘Self’. They tried to attain it by speaking the white language, by questioning and alienating themselves from their own culture. This quest for acceptance and the problem of Identity crisis is theorized by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*. This is also evident in the masterpieces of many authors who were once under then colonial wreckage. This paper deals with the psychological aspects that has affected the once colonial subjects by analyzing *No Longer At Ease* by Chinua Achebe, which shows this identity crisis of the protagonist and his people by making use of Frantz Fanon's notions on *Black Skin White Masks*.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Self, Individuality, Colonial Subjugation

Introduction

Frantz Fanon (1925 -1961) was a writer, psychiatrist, revolutionary, and pioneer of anti and post colonial thought. He was born in the Caribbean islands of Martinique, which was then and as it is still today, an overseas department of France. He received a middle class education and while on the island studied under and befriended Aime Césaire (pioneer of Negritude movement). He was one of a few extraordinary thinkers supporting the decolonization struggles occurring after World War II, and he remains among the most widely read and influential of these voices. His revolutionary life produced two potent works which are *Black Skin White Masks* and *Wretched of The Earth*.

Chinua Achebe was born on 16th November 1930 and died just recently. He hails from Anambara state in eastern Nigeria. Achebe treats the haunting themes of culture, power and dictatorship with candour, wit and satire. His reputation was quickly established with his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which has been translated to in over one twenty world languages. He published his second novel *No Longer at Ease* in 1960 and *Arrow of God* in 1964. His other main work includes *A Man of the People* (1966), *Morning yet on Creation Day*, *Beware Soul Brother* and *Girls at War*.

Black Skin White Masks

I am talking of millions of men who have been skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement (Aime Césaire, *Discours sur le Colonialisme*)

Black Skin White Masks is one of the major works which immortalized Frantz Fanon among the post colonialist theoreticians. With the exploration of the psychology of dehumanization, dependency and de masculinisation of colonial subjects this text remains

even relevant among the post colonialist studies. Much like Dubois's¹ earlier analysis of black men's double consciousness and the effect of internalized dehumanization, Fanon analysed the impact of a cultural inferiority complex on colonized individuals. He studied the relationship between the colonised and colonizer and explored aspects of psychological denial, self-loathing, rejection of "home land culture" and the embracing of the colonial culture which they think to be superior to their own indigenous culture. These studies were written by this author by reflecting his own experience as a student and soldier professional in Martinique and France and in his clinical and scholastic studies. He came to the conclusion that in order to function normally in a hypocritical, racist, "pioneers of civilization" (*Black Skin White Masks*; 111) society black men essentially wore a white mask and mentally alienated themselves from their dark skin. The book closely deals with various incidents which shows this mental alienation and inferiority complex that was injected so skilfully in the hearts of the colonised people. Even though this work was written keeping in mind the Black men who were under the colonial subjugation of France, this book's theory can be so practically applied to all the once colonial subjects. The book dealt mainly not with the physical colonisation of these people but on the contrary a worst condition: the colonisation of the mind.

No Longer at Ease

No Longer at Ease is one among the major works of Chinua Achebe which is actually a continuation of *Things Fall Apart*. The novel is all about the crisis of a young man named Obi who is educated abroad and who got placed in the Civil service of Nigerian government. Obi Okonkwo is a young man, about twenty-six years old, who returns to Nigeria after studying in England at a university for four years. *No Longer at Ease*, begins with a trial against Obi that takes place a while after his return, and the novel then works its way backward to explain how Obi has come to be charged with accepting a bribe. He goes to London to have his studies with the scholarship which was provided by his people. In London he meets a girl named Clara with whom he falls in love. Later Clara tells him that she cannot marry him because she is an osu, an outcast. Obi decides to ignore this and go against what most of his fellow countrymen believe to be a major transgression of custom, and he decides he will marry her anyway. Obi then receives a letter from his father telling him that he must go home. When he arrives at home he sees that his mother is very ill and his parents tell him he must not marry Clara because she is an osu. Obi, therefore returns back to Lagos and tells Clara all that has transpired. She becomes angry and breaks off the engagement, afterwards hinting at the fact that she is pregnant. It is at this point when Obi arranges an abortion. Complications arise out of the operation, and Clara is hospitalized, after which she refuses to see Obi. Obi then returns to work, only to be notified that his mother has died. After all these mental pains, he revives himself. He feels like a new man, and it is at this point that he takes his first bribe, not without a certain degree of guilt. Obi allows this acceptance of bribes to become habitual. He continues to take bribes until the end of the novel, when Obi decides he cannot stand it anymore. He has paid off all of his debts and can no longer be a part of the corruption. It is at this moment, however, when he has taken his last bribe, that he is caught, which brings us back to the beginning of the novel.

Defining Identity

Self Consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self consciousness, that is to say it only by being acknowledged or recognised (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*)

¹ W.E.B Du Bois was an American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan- Africanist, author and editor. He coined the term 'double consciousness' about which he says "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"

In order to deal with the identity crisis first we need to consider the term identity. Identity is a social construct and it is largely determined by the relationship between the Self and the Other. It's through our identity we recognize ourselves as members of various ethnic groups or nation as well as social classes which provide us with a sense of social belongingness. Like this nations are communities which provide a sense of belonging through the individuals feeling of connectedness to his/her fellow men. In other words, individuals as they are a part of one collective body namely a community known as nation, which is in *ipso facto* an idea, defined by Benedict Anderson as "imagined political community" (*Imagined Communities*;6). The survival of the nation depends upon invention and performance of tradition, histories and symbols which help people sustain their Identity. However this mostly depends upon tradition and narration of history, which are central elements. It creates one particular version of the past and identity of any given community. In *espressis verbis* nationalism is based on the very concept of a unified imaginary community. This nation provides people with a sense of belongingness, connectedness and identity through shared territory which they believe they own and therefore have the right to separate it by having borders between nations. Though this very conceit is a western idea, it has been a part of living which determines our very existence. Thus Identity and national consciousness and self consciousness, becomes very relevant till today.

Thirst for Acceptance and Inferiority Complex

The colonial subjugation has in many ways shattered this conciseness and it still has its own implication over the colonised. The colonised knowingly or unknowingly look to the West for guidance. The Inferiority complex which they have planted in the hearts of the once colonised still makes them feel that they are all time inferior and tend to kneel themselves mentally to the once colonial western powers. Though physically they gained freedom they still find themselves to be under this colonial subjugation mentally. The colonised is seemed to be more attached to the west rather than their own nation. They feel that the West provides the best and so they are top in the hit chart. They feel that only if they speak the language of their once masters they would be considered as civilized and accepted. We tend to speak the language of our coloniser much frequently than our own mother tongues sometimes. These are the some traits which the colonised do unknowingly because of the eagerness to be accepted by the Other is always present in all the people who were once under the colonial subjugation. Sadly this is even transferred to a certain extent to the newer generation. This thirst for acceptance of so termed 'self-consciousness' in them, makes them loose their own Self and then tries to imbibe the same traits of the colonial masters in order to be accepted by them. This thirst of acceptance is shown through various actions. As Professor D.Westermann in *The African Today* says:

The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements (14).

Why does this alienation occur? The answer that we get is due to inferiority complex. The once colonised feel that they are inferior to them in colour, culture and ways. So in order to be like the "pioneers of civilization" who told that they have the "White man's burden" to the people who were under colonial rule, the colonial subjects and the once colonised tend to alienate themselves from the identity of their culture and even self. This alienation from the self makes the dilemma of identity which makes them in crisis as to understand to which part actually they belong. This crisis of identity is the main concern of this paper which is analysed through the characters in *No Longer at ease* by Chinua Achebe.

Neglecting Tradition – The Symptom of Identity Crisis

I'm sorry my friend and I don't understand your strange language. I'm but a human being wearing a mask – *No Longer at Ease*

No Longer at Ease mirrors a society which suffers identity crisis. Obi Okonkwo the protagonist of the novel embodies those conflicts and the author is sure to create a character that talks in a way to suggest that he is not sure of himself. The colonial education which he got from the colonial country had made himself confused about what he is. This identity crisis is clear in this novel and actions all over. Through his character the author seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement experienced by the colonised. This crisis can be seen in all the people who are there as the *dramatis personae* of the novel, even though their roles were that less important, these characters showed how the colonised are having this crisis of identity.

The tradition and practices of a country can be associated with the Identity of Individuals as mentioned in the introduction. Tradition and practices are the first things which bind and form an identity of the Self. When Obi the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease* is in open rebellion against his traditions and customs, this crisis of the Self is evident. He acquired his education from the colonial country and this made him in grave doubt, which was: WHAT TO FOLLOW? Either he must follow the tradition of his home land or must follow his own desires which were actually fuelled by the thirst for acceptance of the white man. He feels that these traditions which once he loved and practiced are just uncivilized and barbaric. It's so clear in the novel that Obi was having a problem in acknowledging or in following the traditions and practices which were once a part of his Self. This change in his character can be often said as the affect of the western education which he acquired. As Frantz Fanon says, "the Negroes inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated and who must struggle with it unceasingly" (*Black Skin White Mask*, 56). This is very clear from the statement of Joseph as he opposes the idea of Obi to marry a girl who was said to be an *Osu*. He says:

You know book but this is no matter of book. Do you know what an *osu* is? But how can you know? In that short question he said in effect that Obi's mission house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his country (54)

Is his love for the girl named Clara alone made him take the drastic decision to turn against his culture and traditions? We really have to doubt, because in the end of the novel he is not able to marry Clara. The decision to marry her might be also because of his identity crisis, which made him feel that the traditions of his land are outdated and barbaric. The education which he got from the colonial land made him stranger to his country. This is the worst thing that could ever happen in the life of an ordinary man. Obi in the beginning was a man who felt for his country and wrote poems about his home land and spoke in his *Ibo* tongue whenever he got a chance to speak. Later on he tends to speak much more in English which was the language of his coloniser. There are many instances in the novel which says about his fear of getting lonely in London where he went for his studies. This loneliness aggravated the thirst for acceptance by the white.

Thirst for Recognition – The Factor Fuelling the Crisis of identity

When I should have been begged, implored, I was denied the slightest recognition? I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the Other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself know. (*Black Skin White Masks*, 126)

When the coloniser didn't recognize the identity of the people whom they colonised, these colonised men tend to do many things to make them known and to be accepted by the coloniser. They tried to speak the language of the coloniser and this is what Frantz Fanon says as the first step of Self- Rejection. This rejection of the self is evident throughout *No Longer at Ease* as Chinua Achebe draws in some minor characters who show this thirst to be known

and accepted as equal as their once masters by using the language of the master even if they didn't know the basic grammar or structure of the language. This is clear in the dialogues of the lorry driver and truck assistant who speaks broken English. They knew whatever they were speaking was tough to understand and there were grammatical errors but still they used to speak the language only to mentally feel that they can also speak the tongue of their masters. These were actions which came from the inside of the men and women of the colonised. They do not do it deliberately but they tend to act or behave like the coloniser who consider themselves to be 'Civilized' and the so called 'un civilized' silently followed these called 'Civilized culture and language' and left behind their culture and their identity because they feared that they won't be accepted. The colonised used to wear a mask to make himself away from his own self so that he may not commit any mistake which was told to be uncivilized. So he used the European culture so as not to be harassed again.

The European Post - Second only to actually being a European.

The post which Obi got in the Civil Service which was once in the hands of Europeans when they ruled Nigeria was considered to be a higher post or Even a European post, which would make them feel that they are now equal to the Europeans. The persons who got these post were given a car, an apartment, and moreover a good salary. These all amenities which were once the property of the Europeans were given to the person who passed the exams of civil service. Obi's wish to join the Civil service might be partly because he loved his country a lot as it is evident from the novel as he misses Nigeria in London and when he wrote a poem about his motherland. But as there are two sides for a coin, we need to consider Achebe's quote, which is very relevant here. "To occupy a European post was second only to actually being a European" (*No Longer at Ease*, 70). In de facto is this the reason he tried for Civil Service? Did he feel to be like to be European? The thirst to become a white man was so powerful in him that he became a civil servant under Mr Green who was a practically a racist to the core, who had stereotypic notions about Nigerians and the most interesting part is that Obi was enduring all this to prove himself, that he can also handle the offices which were once the sole property of the white.

Obi's identity crisis cannot be said to be as his fault alone. There are many other factors which hold the accusation. Inferiority complex about the Self is one of the major reasons which make the Identity Crisis in Obi. Though this identity crisis is not so evident in this novel, the novelist clearly depicts this identity crisis of his fellow men through various characters and incidents. Obi as a person when looked outwardly is a patriot who loves his country and wants to do something for his country. But as we consider his deeds and actions so closely we feel that he is also a person who is not free from this crisis of the Self. The acquiring of the 'European post', the decision to go against his culture to marry his love are the major incidents which clarify the above argument. The later actions which he does was actually "over determined from the inside".

As Michel Foucault says "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does" (*Madness and Civilization*). Obi had a great dream to uplift his country from all states of evils but the same person didn't want to follow the traditions of the nation. If you stand for a cause, then you will have to lose something and Obi was not ready for that. That shows his pretension to be a patriot to be foul. The person who loves his country has naturally to love and follow its customs. It might seem barbaric and cultureless and that may have evil and good but that is what which makes each culture unique and special in every way. Hearing the words and filling the heads with the thoughts of other persons ideology and philosophy of life would rather end up in tragedy like that of Obi. He was so confident when he says to his Father that: "But all this is going to change. In ten years things will be quite different to what they are now." (*No Longer at Ease*, 102). He is true that things will change but it takes time. As Rome was not built in a day,

traditions too were not found in a day. It became as system only through ages and, there are good and evil in those. The Evil won't sustain, it would gradually diminish and only the good remains. Obi should have had this in his heart. He rather tried to turn against his own culture in the 'enlightenment' of his western education. He turned against his culture. This crisis of identity which had been injected to the people of colonial lands has always undergone this crisis. What to follow? This is the main question which is always present in their hearts. They choose to follow the culture of the once colonial masters because they felt that they needed the acceptance of the White man, by making him pleased through the civilized ways of speaking behaving and thinking.

The Racist – another Reason for Inferiority Complex

This whole crisis is caused through the Inferiority complex which is there in the heart of the men and women, even today in the once colonised country. Inferiority complex takes its birth in an individual where there is someone who subjugates them or overpower them saying that they are inferior and they do it because they are superior. To make this statement clear Frantz Fanon says: "let us have the courage to say it outright. It is the racist who creates the inferior" (*Black Skin White Masks*, 108). The categorization of the human being to superior and inferior is the worst thing. This categorization was the main evil which left the whole colonized world into places where inferiority complex plays a major role in the lives of individuals. The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is co relative to the Europeans feeling of superiority. This superiority complex made the ordinary man feel inferior to their white masters even though they were equally the same. This is even there in the souls of men and women born even after the independence because this is a mental infirmity which is passed through the generations. In *No Longer at Ease* there is a character Mr Green falls into this category. His attitudes towards the Nigerians are quite clear when he comments about the trial of Obi thus: "They all are corrupt" said Mr Green. "I am all for equality and all that. I for one would hate to live in South Africa. But Equality won't alter the facts." (*No Longer at Ease*, 5)

His statement itself proves that he or his people didn't consider the colonized as equals. They considered them to be inferior to them and thus this inferiority complex which they planted in the hearts of the natives of colonized land were nourished by the colonizers through their style of education and made the colonised believe in the books which taught that the sciences and literature of the Europeans are much worthier than the whole literature of the colonised land. They tried to imprint these thoughts inside the heart of the men and women so that they colonised would remain mentally colonized even when they had to leave the physical colonial rule. The character of Obi shows this. Though Nigeria was liberated at that time, he was still mentally colonised through the western education and because of his inferiority complex which made him thirst for self acceptance and recognition by the superior whitemen. He was mentally subjugated to people like Mr Green who said that all Nigerians are "Corrupt" by which he meant that he and his people are alone "Corruptless". This classifications and differentiation made the inferiority complex so heavy that it has got its effects yet now.

Conclusion

Thus this identity crisis which is so evident in the once colonised is clearly depicted in the novel of Chinua Achebe, where he shows the various traits which the colonised tend to follow in order to quench their thirst for acceptance. Thus the various stages of languages, jobs and the oppressor are the main reasons analysed here for this mental subjugation to the once colonial masters. Thus I reach my conclusion. Thank you.

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch each other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *YOU*? At the

conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness

My Final prayer

O My Body, make me always a man who questions

(*Black Skin White Masks*, 220)

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