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## Discussing the Politics of Identity Crisis and Recognition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### Abstract:

In this paper, I would like to analyze, how during the period of colonization, the native people were subjected to become the victims of the imperialistic ambitions of the colonizers, which ultimately made them vulnerable to undergo an experience of the identity crisis. I would like to trace this idea by means of taking into consideration a remarkable novel, "*Things Fall Apart*," written by Chinua Achebe.

By means of examining this novel, I would focus on the aspect of colonial oppression that was imposed upon the inhabitants of Africa, during the period of colonization-- which subsequently resulted in the fragmentation and complete distortion of their 'sense of self' and 'identity' as a whole.

Moreover, in order to study the notion of identity crisis and complete breakdown of the sense of individuality of the colonized people, I would like to take into consideration the remarkable essay, titled "*The Politics of Recognition*" written by Charles Taylor. At the same time, I would focus on Hegel's philosophy of "mutual recognition", Ngugi wa Thiongo's theory of "*Decolonizing the Minds*" and Franz Fanon's scholarly work, "*Black Skin, White Masks*".

**Keywords: Identity Crisis, Monologic and Dialogic Sense of the Self, Inferiority Complex, Superiority Complex, Eurocentricism, Hegemony.**

Charles Taylor in his remarkable essay, "*The Politics of Recognition*" very eloquently talks about the 'theory of recognition.' His coherent and comprehensive essay provides an insightful understanding of the notion of 'identity' and 'recognition.' In this essay, he states that, our individual identity is not constructed from within or generated by each one of us alone, rather 'it is through dialogues with others' that 'we negotiate our identity.' The idea that our sense of who we are, is determined through our interaction with 'others' (Taylor refers to these 'others' as 'significant others'). He further elaborates that it initiates a shift from a monologic to a dialogic

model of the self. By 'monologic model of the self', he means, the perception of an individual about his own self. On the other hand, the 'dialogic sense of self' means, a sense of self concept, which one constitutes on account of taking into consideration the views and opinions of the people of the society, which ideally has a strong influence in terms of shaping the personality and identity of an individual.

Taylor further goes on to state that, "recognition is a vital human need", it is a core and integral aspect of the social and emotional development of an individual. But, after highlighting and bringing into notice the importance and significance of giving due respect and recognition to others, he also states that sometimes, non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm and grievous wounds on the individual or the group of individuals. As it can result in a form of oppression: imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.

In this context, he cites the plight of the Black people, whose image has been projected as "uncivilized beings", "inferior beings", since 1492 by the Europeans-- the White People. The White society has for generations projected a demeaning image of them; the Black people are forced to acknowledge this fact that they are the inferior beings and barbaric in nature. Consequently, the Black people are made to internalize a picture of their own inferiority and now it has become a part of their being. This in itself brings into light that, colonial oppression results in acute collapse and distortion of the identity of the natives. They are made to suffer from the phenomenon known as-- 'Inferiority Complex'. Subsequently, the internalization of the myth of this innate inferiority results in the complete destruction of their social, religious and cultural life and integrity of the colonized people--a sort of catastrophic break down of their identity.

Hegel, one of the renowned philosophers, brings into notice "the master-slave dialectics of recognition", which he defines as unstable and unsatisfying. He elaborates that master has dominion over the slave, whom, he merely considers as a 'thing' and thereby refuses to accord him equal self-consciousness. Similarly, one can trace this equation of master-slave dialectics operating among the colonizers (masters) and colonized people (slaves). The colonizers consider the natives as inferior beings and hence they try to establish their supremacy over them, by means of military and political tactics. Thus, on account of the lack of recognition accorded to the natives, they are ultimately subjected to undergo an experience of total collapse of their identity and individuality. For Hegel, these relations of domination provide a vicious spiral of

recognition and consequently it results in the complete destruction and shattering of the self-consciousness and identity of the individuals.

Hegel further stresses on the notion of "mutual recognition". He states that, "mutual recognition" is of great importance, in order to gain self-consciousness. Elaborating on this idea, he further states that, understanding ourselves as an independent self-consciousness requires the recognition of the other, and it is never a matter of simple introspection. Sartre's ideology turns out to be completely in synchronization with the idea of Hegel. As Sartre wrote, "The road to interiority passes through the other."

In the similar manner, Charles Taylor elucidates about the ways in which the idea of equal recognition can be understood. One of the central and most important is the idea of "politics of equal dignity" or "politics of equal universalism"; which aims at the equalization of all rights and entitlements. It stresses on the fact that, each and every individual is entitled to get due respect and recognition, on the basis of humanitarian grounds, without taking into consideration any sort of social barriers-like caste, class, creed, gender, race etc.

Judith Resnik in his essay, titled "*Adding Insult To Injury: Questioning the Role of Dignity in Conceptions of Sovereignty*", states that, "The notion of politics of equal dignity, took a radical turn through centuries that followed, as it became a quintessentially personal trait of all human beings and a marker of equality as well". Moreover, politics of equal dignity focuses on "perfect reciprocity". By the notion of "perfect reciprocity" the writer aims at conveying the idea of respecting others as equal to oneself, which in a way builds the foundation for mutual recognition: both in giving and receiving recognition from a respectable party.

The question of identity is of vital importance when we talk about the notion of colonialism (where the colonizers; the so called superior beings, try to establish their hegemony and supremacy over colonized; the so called inferior beings). The notion of identity is not easy to define, specifically, in relation to the equation between colonizers and colonized people. The colonizers do not only rob the natives from their political power but also try to dismantle their religious and cultural identity and thereby inflicting psychological torture on the natives. Thus, the colonial oppression reduces the natives to a mere lifeless entities, alienated within their own

land and subjugated mentally on account of imposition of the foreign languages and customs, resulting in total collapse of their sense of selfhood, solidarity and identity as a whole.

In the course of tracing the equation between colonizers and colonized, one can trace a number of binaries operating, such as: white versus black, civilized beings versus uncivilized beings, and superior versus inferior. In one way it is a reflection of the inner contradictoriness or conflict from which the colonized people are subjected to suffer--the total distortion of their sense of self and identity.

One can discuss the novel, titled "*Things Fall Apart*," written by Chinua Achebe, in terms of understanding the politics of identity crisis in an in-depth manner. This novel is considered as the masterpiece in the history of African literature. It depicts the story of Igbo culture of Nigeria and their encounter with Western Civilization, which ultimately resulted in the colonization and disintegration of their centuries old ways of life. In fact the central theme of the novel is the clash between Igbo culture of Nigeria and Western culture of Europeans, which ultimately resulted in the acute collapse of the identity of the natives of Umuofia village.

*Things Fall Apart* is all about the "collapse, breaking into pieces, chaos and confusion" of traditional Igbo culture, that suffers at the hands of the white missionaries. In this regard, Mahmood Mamdani explains that, "colonialism was not just about the identity of governors, that they were White or Europeans, it was more so about the institutions they created to enable a minority to rule over a majority". In one way, it was an attempt on the part of the colonizers to establish political, social, economic and cultural supremacy.

Before the arrival of the white missionaries in Umuofia, the natives do had their own judicial systems, which were firmly based on the knowledge that their forefathers have passed onto them, about their culture. In their courts, the oldest man in the village was considered as the supreme authority, whose wisdom and knowledge was vested in the power of their ancestral gods to guide them, to give fair and unbiased ruling. But, in order to exert their political and judicial hegemony over the natives, the white missionaries immediately established their own official courts of law and order and replaced their Igbo courts all together at once. This ultimately, marked the beginning of the steady erosion of the identity and integrity of the Igbo

people, under the colonial oppression. They were now reduced to the level of mere aliens (uprooted from their land and culture) in their own community.

The next step, undertaken by the white missionaries in order to maintain and strengthen their oppression was to build schools in order to preach the Christian sermons and gospel to the natives. They started denouncing the ancestral gods and Oracles of Igbo community, stating that,

“These are merely the pieces of woods and stones”,

At the same time, the colonizers glorified their own religious beliefs and customs. They forced the natives to acknowledge their native tradition and customs as inferior and insignificant in nature. This further catalyzed the process of identity crisis-- total collapse of the religious and cultural foundation of the Africans. In this context, Oberika- one of the eldest men of the village states that,

“The White man has put a knife on the things (the customs and traditions) that held us together, and now we have fallen apart”.

Colonialism in Africa was not only restricted to the social, economic and political spheres, rather it had also stretched its boundaries to the cultural sphere of the natives; which involved their religious beliefs and customs. In fact, culture is seen as a most important vehicle for identity formation, by postcolonial writers. In this context, the Igbo culture has been depicted very vividly by Chinua Achebe, by means of his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Their belief and faith in their ancestral gods, oracles and various other rituals and ceremonies, enable them to experience a sense of unique bond of kinship and solidarity among themselves. In short, we can say that, their customs and traditions were truly the pillar of strength for them. But, with the arrival of the Europeans, their pillar of strength began to lose its ground. The Europeans held a Eurocentric worldview-- they firmly believed in the notion that, their culture is superior to the Africans.

Okonkwo, who is depicted as the chief representative of his tribe, was tremendously grieved on account of witnessing the acute distortion of the Igbo society,

“It was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw was breaking up and falling apart”.

Throughout the Umofia village, he was very well acknowledged as "the man of action and fiery spirit", therefore, he took up the charge to liberate his natives from colonial oppression by stating that,

“I shall fight alone, if I choose.”

In the heat of liberating his natives from colonial oppression and to seek revenge from the white missionaries (for the physical and psychological wounds that they have inflicted upon them), he shot one of the messengers of the colonial authority. He did this because; he was tired of the white missionaries and the power of authority that they have claimed over their village.

Abiola Irele, in his essay, titled "*The tragic conflicts in the novels of Chinua Achebe*" states that, "Okonkwo's suicide is a gesture that symbolize his personal refusal of a new order" imposed upon the natives of the Umofia village by the Europeans. Okonkwo being a man of action and violent passion could no longer endure and resist the hegemony and imperialistic laws imposed on the villagers, and thereby experienced a sense of utter collapse of his own identity and the integrity of his society as a whole. Therefore, in the heat and outrage of restoring back the identity of his villagers, he killed the messenger of the colonial administration--registering it as an act of revolt and rebellion against the Europeans.

It can be argued that, Achebe intends to use his novel as a vital instrument of self-discovery, by means of which he attempts to find for his community a sense of recognition in the world. In fact, the very act of writing becomes a means of self-realization and an attempt to reaffirm one's identity. The post-colonial writers interpret; reconstitute their culture and history, in terms of self-consciously locating the 'self'. In this regard, Chinua Achebe's main aim is to use narrative as a medium for reasserting tribal, social, political, religious and cultural identity. "The traumatic experience" of his injured community compelled Achebe to make an attempt to 'relocate' all that has been deserted by the tragic encounter with the colonial west; whereby he describes his condition as 'crisis of the soul'.

Franz Fanon, a French philosopher and a revolutionary believes that, the end of colonialism does not only mean just political and ecological liberation but also a sort of liberation from psychological entanglements as well. This can be achieved by the means of

challenging the imposed identity of the colonizers and at the same time, embracing the native culture, and traditions with utmost courage in order to re-affirm the identity in the true sense.

Franz Fanon, in his essay, titled "On Colour Prejudice", taken from his book: "*Black Skin, White Masks*", states that, language is not only a medium of expressing our feelings and emotions, but at the same time, it is also a medium of exhibiting our cultural identity as well. He gives an example of a Negro of the Antilles, who has learned French language and thereby began to consider himself closer to the Whiteman; he states that this is due to the colonial subjugation of Blacks, at the hands of the Whites.

He is superficially trying to adorn the culture of the Whiteman, in order to earn a title of being a civilized being. But during this phase he fails to realize the very fact that, by means of embracing the language of the Whiteman, he himself has reinforced this idea that, "Blacks are inferior to Whites". Moreover, by doing so, he is alienating himself from his own native soil, its culture and values, and as a consequence suffers from identity crisis. Thus, by means of this essay Fanon aims at bringing into light, how by means of adhering to the Eurocentric philosophy, the natives tend to undergo a sense of inner turmoil, which ultimately results in the steady erosion and shattering of their identity.

Achebe firmly states that, the first step towards regaining and reasserting the original self is initiating the process of 'Decolonization of Mind'-- a concept borrowed from Ngugi wa Thiongo's book, bearing the same title. Ngugi wa Thiongo, one of the Africa's foremost writers, in his essay, titled "*Decolonizing the mind*" underscores the need and importance to embrace the African language and culture, in order to liberate the Africans from the effects of imperialism and colonialism. In his essay, he stresses on the idea that imposing foreign language on the natives of other society can lead to catastrophic events. Initially, colonizers try to establish their supremacy over natives by means of military conquest and thereby become successful enough in attaining economic and political supremacy. Not only this then in order to maintain their hegemony and to mentally enslave natives, colonizers imposed their foreign language upon them, which metaphorically means, imposing foreign culture on them.

Colonizers firmly believe in the idea that, "Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control."

The post-colonial authors aim at recapturing the cultural identity that their baton possessed before their identity was diluted by colonial oppression. So, this quest for religious, social, political and cultural identity echoes primarily in most of the novels being written by Chinua Achebe. His fiction can be seen as "a reclamation of that pre-colonial past and a reassertion of the original Nigerian culture-or more specifically the Igbo culture"(Easto 6). By means of his work, Chinua Achebe is trying to increase the awareness regarding the need for the re-establishment of cultural identity of the natives who were subjected to colonial oppression in their past.

Achebe's main intension behind writing this novel is to reflect and preserve the African culture and tradition, to make people understand the importance and depths of their Nigerian culture. At the same time, he also aims at initiating a process of breaking or shattering away the stereotypical and most specifically Eurocentric notion of Africans as merely 'inferior' and 'uncivilized beings.' In short, by means of writing this novel, Achebe is trying to reassert the fact that the Africans do have their own culture, customs and traditions, which enable them to strengthen their kinship bonds and to experience a sense of solidarity among themselves.

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