ABSTRACT

The modern individual in Nigeria, a creation of western education and culture, is constantly in a struggle with the hegemonic indigenous culture, causing him/her to grapple with the prescriptions of the western lifestyle and the stringent demands of Nigerian culture. Jude Dibia’s “A Life in Full” and Molara Wood’s “Indigo” contain ancient and modern cultural practices and the challenges they present to the educated young people, whose exposure to foreign culture and education intensifies their struggle with the status quo. This paper uses the postmodernist argument to examine this conflict between the centre (indigenous culture) and the periphery (the modern individual), as the latter is on a mission to decentre Culture in order to establish itself as a centred subject in the two short stories. It analyses the psychological struggle by the educated Nigerians to challenge the grand narratives of culture. The paper reveals that, whereas in “A Life in Full” the individual topples the centre, in “Indigo” it is the hegemonic centre that overwhelms and suppresses the educated individual. The paper concludes that the educated Nigerian is constantly in a conflict between Self and Other from which s/he emerges redefined.

KEYWORDS: culture, modern individual, centre, periphery, postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

The image of the modern man is strategically positioned and negotiated in contemporary literature. This image of the modern man, usually shrouded in complexities of materialism almost always defies conventional norms, demands and expectations of society in glaring but contemplated forms. Metaphorically, the modern man is used to represent the byzantine nature of modern societies and the difficulties that attend human’s attempt at understanding and fitting into an ever-changing social space. Broadly speaking, the modern man embodies anxieties that have been systemized in an age and the man in pursuit of diverse satisfaction. Modern man has over the years been described by a certain degree of sophistication that develops with the age and time he exists or simply been associated with a
gnawing drive towards materialism that defies other expectations.

Thomas Bucaro opines that philosophical thoughts and perspectives are significant in understanding modern man and his/her dilemma. He insists that man has evolved from who he basically is or used to be into a current perverted form in modern times (4). Bucaro therefore states that:

The modern man lives in probably one of the most challenging times ever in human history. Torn between individual self and his self in society, he is forced…to choose among them to find the happy medium between the two extremes. The result …is that man in modernity is no longer the basic man he should be. The present era has changed most men into something entirely new, and worse yet, far from better (66).

Whereas modernisation portends opportunities of advancing and improving it would seem for modern man, the complexities, extremes and the extent of loyalties that must be negotiated are often overlooked. M. N. Rajashekara opines that modern man “lives according to the rules of the empty social conventions and those of a decadent culture…He is to some extent aware of his isolation and footlessness. He feels himself entangled in a corrupt, decaying, Ugly Society”, all possibilities that leave the modern man “more and more alienated” (60).

Nigeria is evolving into a postmodern society where social and cultural relations are interrogated on the basis of westernization and globalization. This is better explained by Adole Raphael Audu et al:

Daniel (1999[12]) clearly described a postmodern society as a Postindustrial and consumer society, a media society, an information society, an electronic society, a high tech society and the like. The post modern society in all ramifications and with the new social formation has no respect for the laws of capitalism, namely the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle. A postmodern society ushers in a more pure stage of capitalism (Globalization). (8)

The modern individual in Nigeria, is a complex creation of western education and culture, therefore he is constantly in a struggle with the demand of hegemonic indigenous culture and western prescription. Jude Dibia’s “A Life in Full” and Molara Wood’s “Indigo” contain ancient and modern cultural practices and the lingering challenges they present to the modern Nigerian man who is educated, has acquired foreign cultures and struggles to adhere to indigenous practices which seem to remain the status quo irrespective of his/her morphed appearance and orientation in modern times. This paper uses the postmodernist argument to examine this conflict between the centre (indigenous culture) and the periphery (the modern individual), as the latter is on a mission to decentre Culture in order to establish itself as a centred subject in the two short stories. It analyses the psychological struggle by the educated Nigerians to challenge the grand narratives of culture. John Hartley (49-50) observes that:
Cultural studies sought to account for cultural differences and practices not by reference to intrinsic or eternal values (how good?), but by reference to the overall map of social relations (in whose interests?). The ‘subject’ of cultural studies was no longer ‘the human condition’ but ‘power’. The shape of cultural studies has been directly influenced by its own struggle to decolonise the concept inherited from literary and art criticism, and to make criticism itself more self-reflexive.

The position of this paper is that culture and its power relations are no longer left in the hands of Society alone, but have been disseminated to subgroups and individuals whose worldviews have become transcultural.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The focus of this study will be better articulated using the postmodernist theory of literature. Postmodernism challenges prevailing assumptions of culture, art, politics and religion. It is an ideology that interrogates and seeks to depose existing structures and discourses that held sway in global and cultural worldviews. Ayo Kehinde cites Brooker as saying that, ‘postmodernism describes “a mood or condition of radical indeterminacy, and a tone of self-conscious, parodic skepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual and political life”’ (8). Postmodernism has strong aversion for all traditional superstructures that refuse to identify individual sensibilities.

Tejumola Olaniyan reveals that, “Postmodernism is a cultural/discursive practice, and not an economic or political discourse as such. Its primary concern is the transformation of thinking and subjectivity, meaning, and of the cultural field” (641). This study uses the proposed theory to interrogate the presentation of Self and Other (the modern individual and culture) in the two short stories. This is to examine how the subordinating groups/individuals attempt to displace culture which has been the hegemonic centre. Postmodernism advocates these conflicts that topple grand narratives and establishments that perpetuate themselves. Adole Raphael Audu et al reveal that:

postmodernism suggests a break or extinction of modern movement. It portrays the end of modern ideology in art, social class to an era of globalization. As stated earlier, postmodernism is an abstract expressionism in painting, music, science, architecture, poetry, films, politics etc. It is from the realm of architectural debates that the conception of postmodernism was generated. A Postmodern society is meant to bear a strong family resemblance to all those more ambitious sociological generalizations which bring an inauguration of a whole new type of society. (8)

This paper privileges postmodernism because of its radical confrontation of values, beliefs, knowledge, culture, art, etc., that have been thought unshakeable. The humanism in the modern individual as reflected in the short stories are radically brought to the centre while
cultural beliefs are questioned and viewed with skepticism.

THE MODERN MAN IN A LIFE IN FULL

Victor, Mabel Osondu’s first son is a modern Nigerian man. He is thirty eight years old and single. Victor has no children or known female acquaintance. This, for his mother is bad and also a source of worry since he is the first son. The relationship between Victor and his mother is tense and deteriorates even more when she decides to visit him and nurse him to health from a bout of malaria. Throughout, Mabel remains distraught that “Victor was no longer in his early thirties. He was fast approaching that age when an unmarried, childless man was considered less than whole” (98). The first sentence of the story foregrounds the theme of the supremacy of marriage and children in the Nigerian culture: “Ladies filtered on the streets, restless as dust, and the voices of children playing sometimes found their way into the homes in Macaulay Avenue” (96). This sets the cultural background of story. Contrary to Mabel’s expectation, Victor however prioritises his personal needs and expectation as a young man in modern times, putting into serious consideration his family’s experience with poverty while growing up. He wants to find his footing in life by securing a job, financial stability and basic necessities (98). In pursuit of this personal goal and ambition, Victor loses touch with the socio-cultural expectation of a man of his caliber. His mother is presented as an opposing force that is intolerant of his stance and choice even as an adult. She therefore makes several attempts to discuss the issue during her stay with him.: “What business is it of yours, Mama?…Must I marry?” (99).

She is hopeful that with their support Victor would be made to face the reality of settling down and having children. Unfortunately, his siblings belong to the generation of modernised young people also who seem to undermine social and cultural dictates for their personal goals and satisfaction. They do not join forces with her to demand that Victor maintains the status quo of getting married and having children until he wants to. Thelma seems to proffer what may be described as more definite reasons for Victor’s “enduring bachelorhood” such as: he could be simply happy being single, avoiding the pain of being jilted again or simply gay to their mother. While Jude Dibia has been known to raise the issue of homosexuality and Nigerian’s reaction from a largely socio-cultural and religious perspective in his narrative Walking with Shadows, he seems to simply glide over this subject in “A life in full” although he projects through Mabel’s reaction that this is socio-culturally unacceptable and perceived as bizarre.

Victor remains at loggerheads with his mother and thus the real sufferer as Mabel embarks on what seems to be her personal journey to fulfillment. This fulfillment however remains elusive for Mabel who is an image of indigenous conviction and refuses to embrace the realities which more modern individuals seem to align with and imbibe. Although the narrative begins with Mabel bemoaning the single status of her first son and her vehement attempts to make him comply with socially and culturally acceptable ways of living and being, she later begins to rethink her real intention which is hidden in person dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment.
It is rather significant that Dibia gives the impression that despite the constant struggle with the demand of hegemonic indigenous culture and western perspectives in the narrative; Mama Mabel seems to recoil at the end as she looks inwards and reasons within the realities her daughter, Thelma confronts her with. Mabel was disappointed about her marriage to their father, the sacrifices she had had to make and her many unfulfilled dreams (105). So why coerce another individual into marriage against his will? Dibia uses this tense relationship between mother and son to highlight the conflict between the centre (indigenous culture) and the periphery (the modern individual), as the latter attempts to decentre culture in order to establish itself as a centred subject. The grand narrative of culture is challenged and the individual and modern man topples the centre as Mabel reflects on her small barren garden at the back of Victor’s house. She knew that the tomato seed like every other thing planted in this garden which is a metaphoric representation of her son, Victor would never come to fruition (107).

**INDIGO: DILEMMA OF THE MODERN MAN**

In Molara Wood’s “Indigo”, the major character is a female, as the narrator takes the reader deep into the mind of an isolated modern woman. In this story, the dilemma of an educated couple, who has embraced western education and culture, is presented. Although the story revolves around the couple, Idera and Jaiye, it is Idera’s pains and travails of childlessness, including the ostracism and isolation she faces from the Nigerian society that form the narrative strands of the story.

Molara Wood’s “Indigo” is a story of marital battle for fruitfulness. Idera and Jaiye are influenced by the western practice of deliberate delay of child-bearing. Upon getting married in London, they decide to “enjoy each other’s company first” (216). This was possible for them to achieve when they are away from their cultural milieu, where they face little or no socio-cultural pressure to bear children. Jaiye’s father’s visit to London, where he “broached the subject of a grandchild” (216), referring to their decision to delay childbearing as selfishness, does nothing to change their resolution. His mother’s lamentation that, “I am an old woman, my ears are full. I am hoping you’ve enjoyed each other’s company enough to be able to think beyond yourselves now” (217) still meets deaf ears. However, the old man’s death necessitated their relocation to Nigeria, on the insistence of Kolapo’s mother, who told them: “Come back home. In England you can deflect issues with all manner of new-fangled ideas. Things will be so much clearer here. Come back home” (217). It later proves true that the initiation and denouement of the crisis of culture that follows take place upon their arrival to Nigeria. London and its individualistic vision of life also destroyed Jaiye and Idera, for they begin to see later that marriage and childbearing are social, cultural and communal constructs. The young couple is plagued by the radical individualism of the modern society which pits the educated couple with the African cultural prescriptions.

Even upon their return to Nigeria, Jaiye and Idera seem not to understand the enormity of the conflict and crisis of their choice. The story starts in medias res when they have already spent three years in Nigeria. Their contacts with people in Nigeria prove to be the ‘education’ they need to come to terms with the dominant cultural practices in Nigeria.
Jaiye and Idera face ridicules from loved ones concerning their decision to remain childless even when they have come back to Nigeria. Initially, they appear not to understand the stigma that their status carries in the Nigerian culture; hence, when the story begins, it is this realization that triggers the awareness in Idera, leading to a state of dilemma. She had gone to the naming ceremony of one of her friends, Bola. Bola’s aunt says that the baby resembles his father. Idera counters, saying that: “Actually, the features are not quite set yet…. It may be too early to tell who the baby resembles” (215). This sets her in collision course with Bola’s aunt who believes (perhaps in keeping with culture) that a childless woman ought not to have knowledge of let alone express an opinion on issues bordering on childcare. She rebukes her with a string of hateful rhetorical questions: “Excuse me, but what do you know?, “what do you know about babies?, How many have you pushed out? How dare you contradict me?, ” “Abi, is this not the one that came from London and thinks she’s European?” The empty husk you told me about, parched as a fallen leaf in Harmattan?” (215), and then, “What kind of woman chooses not to have a child?” (216). It is perhaps expedient to say that London ‘destroyed’ the psyche of Jaiye and Idera, and left them tottering on the edge of the African values. which is the reason for Bola’s aunty’s perplexity: “Abi, is this not the one that came from London and thinks she’s European?” Equally important is Yeye Koleoso’s (Idera’s aunt) identification of the cause of the strange and foreign lifestyle that Idera has come to embrace: “I blame myself for sending you to all those fancy schools, in my desire to give you everything I could never give the child I was not blessed with. But now I see I have shielded you from reality, and you’re suffering for it” (213). Europeanization of the western educated Africans has led to their estrangement from their culture.

On the side of Jaiye, it is towards the end of the story that we are shown his own struggle with the superstructure of culture. His discussion with Idera over her ordeals is quite telling of a man’s internal conflict with his society over the choices he has made which runs contrary to predominant social expectation. He tells her: “I’m sorry you had to go through that. Maybe now you understand why I don’t attend these things anymore.” (221). Their is a fight of traditional belief against modern acceptance. Idera and Kolapo are childless because of their ‘diplomatic lifestyle’ of not having children in the early days of their marriage in order for them to attain full intimacy. This foreign lifestyle is antithetical to the African traditional belief. This later becomes the odd as they are forced by external influences to confront headlong with the necessity of having children within the African socio-cultural matrix.

The stronger culture overwhelms the weaker as we see the couple break in the face of the conflict that their lifestyle generated and the attendant public ridicule. According to her: “Four bedrooms, three bathrooms and a visitors’ toilet, two receptions and hedges tended by the gardener, yet something was missing. Had she lied to herself all this while?” (218). She recalls that she has not taken her birth control pills for two-and-half years and recoils at the thought that she might be barren since she has not missed her monthly period. Jaiye also accepts defeat thus: “Damn right it bothers me…. I mean, people might think I’m not man enough or something. How to tell them the Mrs. is a ‘modern woman’ – no time for kids?” (221). Rescue comes their way as Idera explores the roads the gods show her to finding healing to her childlessness, as earlier suggested by her aunt. En route home from a failed
adventure to Abeokuta, Idera receives her ‘healing’ at the indigo river that thirst for water
takes her to.

She eventually conceives, the news of which throws her and her husband, Jaiye, into
ecstasy. In a persuasive use of irony which goes contrary to the western, educated ideals that
they held tenaciously over the years, Jaiye exclaims: “This is the best thing…. I hope it’s a
girl, beautiful as you. We’ll call her Indigo” (223). The irony of the denouement is that the
ideal of the educated, western, individualized freedom for a couple to choose whether or not
they want to bear children collapses in the face of the African tradition which privileges
childbearing. The blindfold placed on Jaiye is removed as he sees pregnancy/childbearing as
‘the best thing’. As a way to further put a stamp of approval on the Nigerian traditional
practices and confirm the therapeutic powers of nature’s gift to Nigeria, Jaiye promises to
name child Indigo if it turns out to be a baby girl.

CONCLUSION

The paper reveals that, whereas in “A Life in Full” the individual topples the centre,
in “Indigo” it is the hegemonic centre that overwhelms and suppresses the educated
individual. The paper concludes that the educated Nigerian is constantly in a psychological
conflict between Self and Other from which he/she emerges. These writers’ sensibilities
convey the anxiety of this modern age. Perhaps, the greatest part of their achievement as
contemporary Nigerian writers also lies in their ability to highlight the realities of dominant
expectations against the backdrop of an ever-changing society and the psychological tension
that seems to remain within modern and traditional individuals whose awareness and
assessment of inexorable changes seem insignificant.

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