

Identity issues in sozaboy and coconut novels

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INTRODUCTION

The construction of identity on a personal and ethnic basis is a struggle faced by characters in Ken Saro-Wiwa's "Sozaboy" and Kopano Matlwa's "Coconut". Culture and language as the major role players of most human identities allow readers to enter a broader realm of understanding how history and the first-hand experience of historical events can influence identity. The focus of this essay is to explore the reconstruction of culture and language to form certain identities as influenced by national history.

The history of South Africa differs from that of Nigeria in terms of the systems that imposed the similar struggles experienced by the less privileged. While black South Africans heavily experienced torment over a longer period of time than the three years during which Nigeria experienced the Civil War, poverty and the reconstruction of culture have been similarly resultant in both countries. Bearing in mind that oppressive ruling by a powerful minority is instrumental in apartheid as well as in colonialism, it is important to avoid ignoring that the end product of these countries' histories is the diminished quality of life for black people. Due to the similarities that I have identified in our selected texts, I will continue this essay's exploration by specifying three points of view and mentioning how they relate to both stories.

LANGUAGE

Because language is the main element of literature, it will also serve as the first discussion point in this essay relative to the main focus. The disordered language in "Sozaboy" reflects the lawless environment that Mene and his

fellow people find themselves in (Uwasomba, 2010, p. 18). “ Rotten English” as it is identified, does not only serve as a symbol through which Nigerian people can be identified. Mene and the people of Dukana were not well educated and such is elementary evidence of poverty and limited educational opportunities. In the speech given by Chief Birabee, it is certain that his understanding of the English language was far better than that of the people of Dukana surely because of his high status. Aspiring to become a driver with a license (as Mene did) may also be evidence of being in a situation where there were limited possibilities for work that could be resourceful enough for literacy. Amongst other unstated reasons, the use of English that was not properly spoken was an advantage for the people of Nigeria because it enabled them to communicate cross culturally, despite the multi-tribal composition of the Nigerian people (Uwasomba, 2010, p. 20).

One may view the use of English as erosive to indigenous Nigerian languages in some way. But it is hard to ignore the fact that people in Nigeria have adopted the language and reconstructed a new identity for themselves through a language that was initially foreign to them. Uwasomba describes English as being “ nativised” (p. 20-21) and this is how the poorer Nigerian population has managed to find their way through the oppression experienced due to the effects of colonialism and the civil war.

The ordered language in “ Coconut” on the other hand, reflects the dominance of the white and more privileged society as opposed to the struggling black lower class. The language of the privileged has been well-learned by black people like Fikile (who is just a waitress) and the aspiration

to become white as well as to not be identified with blackness is displayed through her ability to speak proper English. In this story, we realise that the desire to become whitened is demonstrated through language. The raising of a hand by a black girl (Ofilwe) when a question about who spoke the English language was asked in class also proves that language and identity cannot be separated. The resultant disagreement by Ofilwe's classmates about her being English speaking stems the fact that one's race and language are undeniably related (it is very scarce to find English speaking black children being identified as English and subsequently white). The forsaking of black original language and culture or the partial use and practice of such is for some known reason a way in which characters like Fikile and Ofilwe try to escape blackness. Unlike the characters in "Sozaboy", these two females live in a country where black culture was and still is advocated for. Until this very day some activists still fight for children to be taught in their home languages even at university level. Although the young females find momentary escape from being black (at work for Fikile and through a better lifestyle for Ofilwe), the denial or forsaking of one's authentically black identity is quite a major concern with regard to language in South Africa as opposed to "nativity" in Nigeria (since being black in Nigeria is composed of the adoption of the English language).

BEAUTY

Beauty is another form of identity that Jessica Murray (2012, p. 92) says has been influenced by what is referred to as "racial hierarchy". In the obviousness of white people being seen as more superior than black people,

I find it suiting to believe that Ken and Kopano realised that the definition of beauty has been based more on the white people's physical features.

When Mene sees the picture of the white woman that Zaza has been with (Saro-Wiwa, 1994, p. 33-34), Mene commends the white woman's beauty and apparel very well. We learn that the other men that were with Zaza were very proud and overjoyed mainly because Zaza was involved with a white woman. The author provides no evidence of such joy and pride by men of Dukana when Mene decides to join the army so that he can come back to marry Agnes. Mene's decision to see it as a good thing to marry Agnes seems to be influenced by seeing Zaza being involved with a white woman (beautiful and better dressed). In this situation, Agnes' appearance of beauty to Mene was also determined by Zaza's life as a retired soldier and involvement with a white woman. Zaza's decision to not marry another woman (Saro-Wiwa, p. 34) may also hint that being involved with a white woman may have been the highpoint of sexual relations for him. And also that since he came back to Dukana, women from Dukana were probably no longer of marriage worth for him. On the same page, Duzia asks Zaza why he did not bring a piece of the dead white woman's long hair and this leads us to considering hair as a publicly admired symbol of beauty. We are introduced to a little black girl with braided hair in "Coconut" and the hair is obviously unnatural (Matlwa, 2007, p. 1). The little girl is seen by Ofilwe in church (a public place) and from this image, it is clear that the parents of the child are the ones that permitted the child's hair to be braided. To be seen without her natural hair at a very tender age is symbolic of a desired or adopted identity of the child's family for itself as well as for the child. The

European ideal of beauty is hereby shown as one that black South Africans have accepted for themselves as well as their offspring (Hlongwane, 2013, p. 14). Despite the fact that Zaza's white partner was dead, the admiration for European beauty seems to have lived past death amongst black people since Duzia asked for a mere piece of hair.

As for the little child with braids one may say that because hair lives since it grows and bearing in mind that the synthetic braids on the child's head can be seen as dead because it does not grow; the European ideal of beauty is one that has been infested as dreadfully as death is, into the future of black people regarding how they define beauty.

SOCIETAL STRATA

The strata of society which can be described as the levels or classes to which people are designated according to their social status (Murray, 2012, p. 95), education, or income have a major involvement in the identities of the characters in both novels.

One cannot deny the fact that the hierarchy of class in society is a product of the power, exercised by a certain group of people, with aims to gain total control over the resources and land in a country (Gunn, p. 11). The fear of the colonialists about their place in Nigeria and South Africa can be noted as a driving force of war and apartheid to ensure superiority (Uwasambo, 2010, p. 22-23). Money can be upheld as one of the symbols that determine the levels of individuals' classes in any society firstly because it is either taken from the poor, prevented from them having a lot of it and also because people fall into different social classes according to the amount of money

they have. King Birabee's societal status was obviously higher than that of the people he lead. His manipulative order for the people of Dukana to start paying one and three shillings according to their different genders immediately reports to the reader that the poor were prohibited from financial freedom and further gain. Working as a waitress and having to be on a train with people with unpleasant bodily odours makes up part of Fikile's life as a character in "Coconut". An unpleasant body odour is evidence of being poor, not having proper sanitation and in a more socio-political sense not being in a position of sharing the use of the country's resources equally so. Hard labour that profits the privileged can also be viewed as the means of production for the bad odour that disgusted Fikile whenever she travelled by train.

CONCLUSION

The language, ideas about beauty and societal classes of people are inevitably influential to the manner in which they are identified. Class dominance cannot be ignored in the construction of the working and non-privileged societies. Moreover, these three also have an effect on how people identify themselves or develop as well as reconstruct their identities within a larger context of society. Identity should not be negotiated or substituted through motives of the dominant; its roots ought to be authentic and distinct.