



RESEARCH PAPER

Construal of Nation and Identity: A Postcolonial Analysis of the Play *Madmen and Specialists* by Wole Soyinka

Nimra Nawaz

MS Research Scholar, Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author

nimraanawaz@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to study the construal of postcolonial nation and postcolonial national identity in the play *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) by the Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka. The present paper draws on the postcolonial theory with special focus on the postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon's concepts presented in his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The findings of the paper reveal that even after gaining independence from the colonial rule, the newly independent nations cannot free themselves from the clutches of colonial rule. The colonial oppression just changes its form; it does not end completely. Post colonial nations may remain succumb to colonial oppression at the hands of their own native cultured class / native intelligentsia. Moreover, their national identity and national culture fall apart, and they live either with a hybrid culture and identity or get totally immersed in the Western/colonizer's identity and culture

KEYWORDS

Colonized, Colonizer, Frantz Fanon, Madmen and Specialists, Postcolonial, Wole Soyinka

Introduction

Wole Soyinka was a Nigerian playwright, essayist, poet, and critic. He was the first African to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986. Soyinka through his writings raised his voice about the deteriorated and dilapidated social and political conditions of the colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. Due to his active participation and commitment to social and political conditions, he was incarcerated, and he remained in prison for two years. In those two years he wrote some of his monumental works which manifest the socio-cultural and political milieu of the newly independent Nigeria. These works include: *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1971), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), *Season of Anomy* (1973) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). The play *Madmen and Specialists* is a two-act play written by Wole Soyinka in 1971. *Madmen and Specialists* is a complex, allegorical play which explores the themes of absolute power, corruption, oppression, manipulation, and psychological control of the oppressed by the oppressors in the post-colonial world. The present paper aims to study the construal of postcolonial nation and identity in the play *Madmen and Specialists*. The theoretical framework of the present study majorly relies on postcolonial theory with special emphasis on Frantz Fanon's concepts presented in his work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

Literature Review

Postcolonial theory emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century and its aim is to counter the Eurocentric narratives and perspectives and to give representation to the

voice and identity of the colonized people. This theory soon found its niche in many academic disciplines, such as Literature, Sociology, Gender Studies, Anthropology and Cultural Studies. Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Frantz Fanon are some of the prominent names in the Postcolonial Studies. They all belong to postcolonial nations and due to their untiring efforts and monumental pieces of writings, the issues of postcolonial societies got highlighted and became the topic of discussion in academic circles. They gave the important postcolonial concepts, such as 'Othering,' 'Hybridity,' 'Subaltern,' and 'National Consciousness' etc.

Edward Said in his influential work, *Orientalism* (1978) proposes the concept of the "Other." This concept of the "Other" is very crucial and central in the post-colonial studies. It elucidates that the Westerners due to their preconceived notions, stereotypes, and prejudices represent the non-Western (Middle Eastern, Asian, and African) people and cultures as primitive and exotic (p. 1). So, this monumental work by Said shifts the focus primarily on the false representation of the non-Europeans by the Europeans.

The issue of representation, voice, and agency of these non-Western and marginalized sections of the society is also raised by an Indian scholar and critic, Gayatri Spivak in her legendary essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". She holds the view that the writers and the intellectuals need to become the relay to the voice of the subalterns. She posits in her seminal work, "Can the Subaltern Speak" that these subalterns cannot speak for themselves, rather they need to be represented by the powerful people (p. 71). Various postcolonial writers propose different ideas to challenge and resist the colonial rule and the hegemony of the powerful people. Few recommend appropriation, while others are in favor of abrogation of the colonizer's language and culture altogether. In this context, Frantz Fanon, a postcolonial theorist echoes the perspective of dismantling colonial rule through violence and force. He writes in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms" (p. 21). He also puts forward this idea that national consciousness, national identity and national culture of the colonized people can be used to destroy the hegemony of the colonizers. "A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on" (Fanon, 1961, p. 232). So, the ideas and the consciousness raised by these postcolonial theorists encouraged the novelists and poets to write about postcolonial elements and themes in their literary works as well. Post-colonial literature comprises the literary works written by the writers of the post-colonial nations. It consists of the effects of colonization and processes of decolonization.

Some of the prominent postcolonial writers are Arundhati Roy, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka who talked about the colonial history and anti-colonial struggles of their respective countries i.e., India, Saint Lucia and Nigeria respectively. In Nigerian literature, an eminent postcolonial writer is Wole Soyinka. Soyinka is the representative and ambassador of Nigeria, the instability in Nigeria's political system and varied community norms are the focus of his writings (Lala, 2023, p. 242). Soyinka's writings are also deeply influenced by Yoruba culture. Yoruba traditions and values give him a rich material to write his plays (Simran & Mahal, 2022, p. 68). Other than the elements of Yoruba and Nigerian culture, his works also consist of postcolonial themes such as need for cultural and national identity, struggle for independence, resistance against colonial and political oppression etc. His play, *Madmen and Specialists* is also written in this context. Abdulrazak Gurnah in his article "Outrage and Political Choice in Nigeria: A Consideration of Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, *The Man Died*, and *Season of Anomy*" writes that the cult of 'AS' is indoctrinated in the minds of the mutilated beggars, and they are submitted before the authoritative rule (p. 2). According to Fortress et al.,

"*Madmen and Specialists* is a satiric comment on the perennial conflict between pro-nature, earth-preserving human forces and anti-nature, earth-exploiting persons. It is also a moral condemnation of man's irrational craving for power, domination and exploitation" (p. 228). The play *Madmen and Specialists* unveils the greed of absolute power at the ideological level. The ideas of the two main characters, Dr. Bero and the old man are in total opposition to each other. Dr. Bero symbolizes absolute power, and the old man is a symbol of resistance (Deokule, 2019, p. 1). Banerjee in her work, "An Ecocritical Reading of Badal Sircar, Derek Walcott and Wole Soyinka's Drama" highlights the ecocritical dimension of the play, *Madmen and Specialists*. She writes, "Speaking of Si Bero, she and the other female characters (the two old women) seem to appreciate nature and its power and maintain closeness to it, admitting its beauty..." (2019, p. 372).

By reviewing the related literature, the research gap is found out. It is established that in many published research articles, Soyinka's play *Madmen and Specialists* has been analyzed from aspects and themes such as, power dynamics, exploitation, psychological control, ecocriticism etc. The postcolonial thematic analysis of the play *Madmen and Specialists* is relatively an underexplored area, very less research papers have been written on this dimension. Therefore, this present paper strives to fill this gap by doing a postcolonial analysis by considering Frantz Fanon's postcolonial concepts propounded in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

Materials and Methods

I here draw on Frantz Fanon's concepts related to postcolonialism presented in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Frantz Fanon is a revolutionary thinker and philosopher from Martinique. His works critically investigate the issues of colonialism, postcolonialism and the far reaching social and psychological impacts of colonialism on the subjugated masses. His most important and famous work in connection with Colonial and Postcolonial discourse is *The Wretched of the Earth*. For this paper, I have done a close reading of the text and textual analysis of the play *Madmen and Specialists* is done in the backdrop of Fanon's ideas proposed in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. The present paper is purely qualitative and analytical in its approach.

Results and Discussion

Post colonial as a separate field of study gained significance in the latter half of the twentieth century when most of the colonies gained independence from the European/Western dominance. The main aim of postcolonialism and post-colonial studies is to explore the processes of colonization, its long-lasting impacts on the colonized, struggles of resistance of the colonized and the processes of decolonization. It strives to debunk the narratives of the colonizers and gives voice to the perspectives, experiences, and cultures of the colonized. Regarding the voice and representation of the subaltern countries, Jean Paul Sartre comments on the contributions of Frantz Fanon in the preface of *The Wretched of the Earth*. He says, "In short, the Third World finds itself and speaks to itself through his voice" (p. 9). It is also one of the accomplishments of postcolonial studies that now the writings of the postcolonial writers are read in the Western academia and discussed in the global context.

Nigeria remained a colony of the Britain for a long time, and it gained independence from the foreign rule in 1960. Soyinka, being a postcolonial writer, sets up the themes of his writings in the context of colonial and postcolonialism. This is because the writer makes those things the topic of his/her discussion which have a long-lasting impact on him/her. The things which haunt him/her and the things which s/he cannot

easily forget, and for Soyinka, Nigeria's colonial past and post-colonial struggles hold massive importance. This also manifests the patriotic spirit and genuine concern of Soyinka about the well-being of his beloved country Nigeria because he wants to see Nigeria prospering, thriving and free from the shackles of colonialism. Therefore, in most of his writings, the elements of postcolonialism can be found. I here aim to explore these elements in his play *Madmen and Specialists*. Before delving into the analysis of this play from postcolonial lens, a brief overview of the play is given as under:

The play opens with the four mendicants, Aafaa, Goyi, Cripple and the Blind man who are sitting beside the road. All four of them seem to be indulged in absurd talk. Then the readers are introduced to the character of Si Bero who is involved in collecting herbs under the guidance of two mother figures, Iya Agba and Iya Mate. She seems to wait for the arrival of her brother, Dr. Bero from the war and her father (the old man) as well. As the play moves on, the greed of absolute power of Dr. Bero is revealed; his desire to control the people psychologically and to become their demigod is uncovered and for this purpose, he uses the four mendicants as his pawns. The intoxication of power also makes him kill his own father (the old man) towards the end of the play.

The play is very dark, and the ending is very disturbing but through this setting, Soyinka depicts the dark times of Nigeria during colonial rule and after independence as well. Because the years after Nigeria's independence, the late 1960's were very challenging. There was misuse, abuse of power by the politicians, civil war, chaos, disorder, and identity crisis in the newly independent Nigeria.

The Post in the postcolonial does not necessarily mean that colonialism has been ended. Obviously, the physical occupation of the less powerful countries by the powerful countries ended in the middle of the twentieth century but it still pretty much exists, the forms and processes of oppressing the less powerful people have changed but oppression is very much there. This is also called new or neo-colonialism. The binaries of colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed still exist. And Soyinka in this play sheds light on it through the character of Dr. Bero. Soyinka establishes that the more powerful people are near to the center and the less powerful are pushed towards the margins and peripheries. In the same way, the binary of colonizer/colonized is also established in *Madmen and Specialists*. Dr. Bero, having dominant power and position, takes the center position, becomes the colonizer and the four mendicants become the colonized who receive the wrath and fury of the colonizer. Fanon proposes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonizers have this tendency to create the elites of a country as the new colonizers. "The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement..." (p. 152). These elites are the legacy and successors of colonialism. They are the people with Black skin and White mask. These handful of elites then rule in place of the colonizers and that is how the cycle of colonialism continues even after the formal end of colonialism. "The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor" (Fanon, p. 52) because half of their lives they remained at the receiving end of the violence and oppression, so they do not miss the opportunity to come to the giving end and become the authoritarians towards their own people. Therefore, Dr. Bero is a true representative of the intellectual elite of the post-colonial country who follows the footsteps of the colonizers. And this is manifested through his dialogue when he says he controls lives (Soyinka, 1971, p. 264). He becomes violent towards his own people: the mendicants and treats them in the same way as colonizers treat the colonized. He views them as uncouth, barbaric, and uncivilized beings.

Another notion which Fanon postulates in *The Wretched of the Earth* is that these native intellectuals get immersed in Western culture. 'West is the best' ideology gets

seeped into their minds, and they start looking down towards their own indigenous, native cultural values and traditions. "This is because the native intellectual has thrown himself greedily upon Western culture...the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own" (p. 217). This is also manifested by Soyinka in his play through the character of Dr. Bero. When Si Bero (sister of Dr. Bero) welcomes him by pouring palm wine in front of the door (which is the tradition in Nigerian society) then Dr. Bero dislikes it and says that you are keeping up with these traditions and habits (Soyinka, 1971, p. 234). He also seems to move away from Nigerian traditional values when he says to Iya Agba, "watch it old woman, your age earns no privileges with me" (Soyinka, 1971, p. 259). In Nigerian culture and Yoruba language, the word 'Iya' means 'Mother' and mother figure/elderly women are given massive respect and reverence, but Dr. Bero also seems to do opposite of it, thus moving away from the traditional, native Nigerian values.

Fanon proposes that "The most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build up his nation" (p. 246). He is of the view that it is the writer's, the native intellectual's job to make the colonized think and speak against colonialism. And Soyinka gives manifestation of this proposition in his play through the character of the old man (Dr. Bero's father). The old man is portrayed as an intellectual by Soyinka who takes up this arduous task of encouraging the common man to think and speak up for his rights. In the play, the old man raises this consciousness of being subjugated in the minds of the four mendicants. "He began to teach them to think, think and think" (Soyinka, 1971, p. 242). Soyinka very intelligently employs the philosophy of 'AS' in the play. Through this maxim of AS, the old man tries to unveil the power and psychological control of the colonizers. The philosophy of AS elucidates that the subjugated masses accept the tyranny of the oppressors and become blind to reality while the oppressors become their divine leaders to guide them towards their destiny. The old man in the play is a voice of resistance against oppression and colonialism just like real life Wole Soyinka. But the question arises what happens with these people of insight and vision who dare to raise voice and question the authoritarian rule of the colonizers. Unfortunately, they become the victims of cruelty and torture at the hands of these tyrants. The same happened with the intellectual and visionary writer Wole Soyinka who was sent to prison, and he remained there in solitary confinement. And in the play, *Madmen and Specialists*, the old man also met a tragic death. First, he was confined in the cellar of the house and then towards the end of the play, he was killed by his own son, Dr. Bero.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is estimated that the formation of independent nations and national identities in the truest sense are never achieved by the postcolonial nations. The native inhabitants remain confused and perplexed about their identities; they either get totally assimilated into the foreign, Western culture or develop hybrid identities - containing elements of both native and foreign culture. It seems like these nations achieve independence by paying a hefty cost of losing their own indigenous culture, values, and traditions. This notion is also echoed by the character of the Blindman in the play, *Madmen and Specialists* who says in his speech, "What though the wind of change is blowing over this entire continent, our principles, and traditions- yes, must be maintained. For we are threatened, yes, we indeed threatened" (Soyinka, 1971, p. 270).

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