



Retrieval of Identity in Postcolonial Ghana in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

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Abstract

Freedom of postcolonial African countries are least experienced by the people. Years of slavery distorted even souls of the people of Africa. Healers were the redeemers of West African natives from the enchantment of imperial influences of westerners. Ghana is a West African nation colonised by the British rulers until 1957. Westernization began to spread among Africans by increasing their basic needs in the name of modernization. Colonial domination replaced traditional medicines with Western medicines. The ideologies imposed by Westerners continued to dominate native Africans even after their countries gained independence. This paper decodes the strategies used by intellectuals to reclaim the lost identity of Ghanaians from their colonial identity. It emphasizes the methods intellectuals used to reunite African people by analysing the events in the novel *Fragments* by Ayi Kwei Armah. The paper focuses both on the causes and effects of the efforts of intellectuals for the identity retrieval of post-colonial nation. It also analyses the disillusionment experienced by the intellectuals of the society for their deeds.

Key words: Traditional, Colonial, Identity.

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West Africans followed an oral tradition to pass their culture and traditional values to future generations. People who transmitted their cultural significance through oral tradition were called Griots. They were respected as the leaders of their villages. Before the influence of Christianity and Islam, the natives of most African countries worshipped the souls of the dead as their gods. After 15th century, European traders emigrated to Africa and started to colonise the African people to get the control over them. They idealised themselves among the native Africans in all their activities. The western domination imposed their own culture and tradition among the natives as ideal one and insisted them to follow western culture. Native Africans believed themselves to be inferior to Westerners and began to lose their rich culture by adopting Western practices. Probably, the postcolonial environment led to the degradation of their native culture and traditions. Postcolonial African society completely adapted to the influence of the western culture and traditions. People believed in the traditional customs of colonisers as their framed rules for the life of the West African society. Healers are the resistance of the Western influence among natives from colonial period.

Division among the people was considered as the significant problem of the West African people by Healers. Healers identify division of soul and a body as the first issue and conflict between one community and individual or other community and the individual as second issue. On the whole, they strive for the unity of their own people without any discrimination. Damfo explains the Healer's knowledge as "It says there are two forces, unity and division. The first creates. The second destroys; it's a disease, disintegration" (97). The traditional medicines and practises help the people to defeat the disease as well as heal the body and community by unity. The traditional medicines lost its influence among the people after British colonisation. Many missionary hospitals were built during the colonial Government. People got attracted towards the Western medicines and demolished the traditional methods of healing. As the result, the traditional practisers of healing were considered as criminals by the colonial Government and made those people live in hiding. The Western medicines had the aim of curing the physical diseases and they failed to cure the psychological diseases caused by the adaptation of strange culture and traditional practices.

The intensity of imperialism over the natives of Ghana supported the colonisers to exploit the resources of the country. To emphasis, after independence of the nation, imperialism was the significant method of ruling followed by the colonisers to dominate the people. Imperialism is the process of extending colonial power over other colonised nation with indirect means of hard power and soft power. In Ghana, even after independence, people continued to follow the customs and rules established by the colonizers during their rule. However, intellectuals in various fields are striving to change these long-standing, oppressive customs. In Armah's novel, *Fragments*, the psychiatric doctor, Juana tries to demolish the inevitable colonial idea existing in a hospital. She asks the nurses working under her in the hospital to call her by her name instead of her title as doctor. But she fails in her attempt, "she had only succeeded in embarrassing them,... they had made her understand that it was strange and threatening to them" (*Fragments* 26). The nurses get afraid

to accept the new formality which Juana tries to implement. The fear of the nurses comes out of the customs to obey the rules of authorities. The people working in the hospital are separated by the title of the position they deserve. As an educated doctor, Juana tries to promote equality among the employees by calling them by their names instead of their titles. In this way, Juana helps to restore a cultural identity of unity. The scenario helps to understand that the people of colonised nation fear to recover from the old rules framed by the colonisers. This causes self-destruction of their own identity in the nation.

Working class people in the society have been facing the similar problems from the precolonial to post-colonial era. The suppression of the rich people begins with fake service they do to the poor, which are considered disgusting for their own soul from the perspective of the educated natives. The psychiatric lab assistant, Bukari talks about the patients of the lab: "...they first try to find a way out themselves, out of a bad life" (43). The deep observation of the lab assistant helps him to identify that honest people who lives self-satisfactory lives are considered as abnormal people by the mediocre society. As ordinary people of the society, the psychiatric lab is approached with pessimistic ideas. But as an educated person, Bukari detects the issues in the lab and considers lab as a place where the suppressed people get rehabilitation of their life. He says that the drugs and wee smokes consumed by the patients are the means they use to get rid of their suppression and finds their own independent identity in the corrupt imperialistic society.

The blind faithfulness to rules established by the colonizers demonstrates the poor resistance of the postcolonial Ghanaian people to the influence of other nations. As Ghanaian citizen, Juana's idea about the society ends with the conclusion, "People with their eyes deliberately closed against the knowledge that their own useless lives were part of the slow dissolution of their peoples, doomed to an extinction started long ago" (52). The disease of the Ghanaian during colonisation emerged out of the imperial government of the colonisers. But the postcolonial disease of the people emerges from their own mind and psyche. Juana's words caution that the people's ignorance in independent Ghana about illegal and corrupt actions can lead to a resurgence of colonial suppression and slavery. The unity of the people has been distorted by the slavish mentality of the people. Even after independence, people failed to question against the authorities of their own nation for their rights to live with their own identity. As mentioned by John McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, "Oppressed people discover their unity in the simultaneity of their suffering" (81). The mindset of the oppressed leads to mass disparity rather than unity. This makes them to live an alienated life with uncertain identity in the nation. The mindset of natives remains as obstacle for the educated natives to bring back the unique heritage of their own in the westernised postcolonial nations.

Postcolonial society had been separated by class discrimination. Poor people are less concerned by the Government but they are maintained to live in disillusionment that they have all rights in the society. The class discrimination became the gradual progress of the formation of new identity of the people. Baako, the protagonist of the novel, is an educated Ghanaian citizen tries hard to get a job as junior assistant to the secretary of Civil Service Commission. But the secretary neglects him in every attempt. The artist, Kofi Ocran diagnoses the issue as: "There are dozens of organizations, supposed to take care of this and that. But if you want anything done you have to go running all round these stupid organizations themselves" (*Fragments* 121). The issue lies as great anxiety of many educated people of the nation. As an intellect Ocran instructs that Baako could not find job in frank honest way, instead he needs to bribe the officials or depend on fake organisation. The situation highlights that a mediocre citizen of Ghana rarely receives privileges like people in power without bribing officials. The organizations established to improve their lives remain a source of disillusionment for the people. Through advising the protagonist Baako, Ocran makes him understand that the social identity was the cause for his unemployment. Ocran is keen on understanding the events around him, which helps him become a renovator of their distorted identity and address the disparity among educated Ghanaians. The educated Africans often fail in the progress of the upliftment of the society rather they get rational thinkers as their company in the native land.

The postcolonial Ghanaian thinkers and writers suffocate to live for their sufferings to forget their impotence to heal the diseases of the society. Writers are fond of assessing the corrupt people of the society disregarding their status in the society. The novel exemplifies the character, Lawrence Boateng, a writer for the statement. Lawrence is completely drunk when he came to attend the soirees headed by the magazine editor Akosua Russell. He reasons Juana for his drunkardness with a question; "I see the truth when I'm drunk, and I can say what I see. Is that wrong, Doctor?" (155). The question even confuses the Doctor to answer. Even the drug becomes a medicine for the writer to emancipate himself from the psychological breakdowns he faces in the society. The alcohol enriches the mind of a social thinker to expose the truth of the society. Lawrence displays the flaws of a wealthy individual in society by being a drunkard at a public meeting. For revealing the truth, he is beaten by Russell's bodyguards. Lawrence, as a healer, identifies the problem of the society and heals the problem by sacrificing his own dignity in the public meeting. Though the method of healing is contradictory to the traditional way of healing, Boateng adapts the practical way of finding the medicine for the disease of ignorance of the native about the crooked mind of the rich people in the nation.

Ignorance of the native people about the corrupt politicians and the hypocrisy of rich people in the society restrains them from understanding the truth. So, ignorance can become the disease of post-colonial Ghana. In the workshop for writers, Russell avoids the question of the boy who asks for his higher education. This rages the anger of Boateng and he exposes the truth: "Nobody meets to discuss real writing anymore. This has become a market where we're all sold" (167). Where, as a writer Boateng identifies the problem that the organisations and the rich people like Russell conduct workshop in the name of the welfare of the Ghanians, but in reality, they conduct the workshop for their own

benefits. As a writer, Boateng expresses his anxiety, but as a healer, he destroys the ignorance of the people who still believe that the rich will uplift the lives of them through such hypocritical meetings.

The disease of psychological suppression caused by the public service departments and political leaders makes the people suffer in the unjust society. The protagonist, Baako happens to see the truck driver, Skido meets with an accident and dies while shifting his lorry in the jetty. The lorry is loaded with food materials to be transported, but Skido gets worried about the wastage of food by waiting for more days and moves his lorry in low space boat. This causes him the accident. Baako complains the engineer that the accident occurred because of making the lorry delay for three days on the shore. But, the engineer ignores him with the question; "It's always serious. They're just like animals. They don't think, that's all"(198). So, even educated engineers avoid the common working-class people in every field. Skido's soul is pure by his action of saving the food for the people to whom he is going to deliver, as a driver. So, Skido is identified as animal in the society by the rather than identified as truck driver. This makes him to lose his self-identity as human being in the society. By looking at these events, as an educated intellect, Baako worries more, because of his impotence to bring change in any system of his society which is diseased in every aspect.

The well-wishers of the nation, suffered under loneliness because of their honest living in corrupt land. Postcolonial Ghanaians got discriminated by their economic status in the society. But they lost their African identity through westernisation and poor financial status. The educated intellectuals of Ghana try their ways to rescue the ignorant people who live an absurd life in corrupt society. Though they could not bring ultimate change in the society, they diagnose the problems of the people and make them realise that the society is spoiled with several causes such as materialistic minds and class discrimination. The efforts of educated natives of West Africa to reclaim their traditional identity can only resist Westernization, not eradicate it.

Work Cited

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