

A Neocolonial Study of Hybridity and Identity in Wole Soyinka's *the Interpreters*

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka, the first African Nobel laureate in literature in 1986 is mainly famous for his plays. However, one of his novels, the *Interpreters* (1965), has been praised and criticized for stylistic and ideological problems, by some critics. The title of this novel draws the attention of many readers to these interpreters. The interpreters of the Soyinka's novel are five intellectuals who have returned home after independence of their country. The critical views of these characters -interpreters- is clearly evident from the widespread corruption and other social problems in most Nigerian sectors and institutions. The identity crisis throughout this novel can be recognized as a cultural mix and in some cases a biological one. The psychological problems of social identity, any identity crisis and hybridity, as well as the term "colonialism" are the main concerns of this study. Neocolonialism was analyzed as a more controversial term compared to other dominant terms, postmodernism and postcolonialism. After describing neocolonialism and its relation to literature, the study addresses the characters in the novel and discusses the concept of hybridity and identity issues in their lives. Post-independence Nigeria as a background to this work clearly illustrates the identity challenge and hybridity in Soyinka's characters. Not to be mesmerized by western culture and amalgamate it ineptly with of one's own, as well as highly valuable political intervention of literature to reflect psychological problems of suppressed societies would be regarded as a significant finding of such researches.

Keywords: neo-colonialism; identity; hybridity; colonizer; colonized

INTRODUCTION

Soyinka is one of those distinguished revolutionary and experimental writers whose bitter criticism reflects both the imperfections and shortcomings of political condition in his own country as well as problems engendered by post-colonial and neocolonial condition created by imperial world. However, in his experimental work, *The Interpreters*, he looks mainly to those kinds of problems which are rooted in post-colonial society and cultural milieu and its consequence of neocolonial conditions overwhelmed

in his society, however at the same time reflects problems caused by internal corruption of various Nigerian institutions and its government. The present study aimed at highlighting post-colonial and neocolonial facts in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, and also supporting the research by discussing about Homi Bhabha's theory about hybridity, well-detailed in his seminal work, *The Location of Culture* (1994). Even though there is a general consensus that many experts and researchers have discussed postcolonialism, postmodernism, and neocolonialism beforehand, approaches towards introducing, comparing, and contrasting of these literary and politically concepts and movements have been done in pairs, specifically between postmodernism and postcolonialism. After Nigeria's independence in 1965, Wole Soyinka found it appropriate situation to write a novel by which, he would be able to depict Nigeria's people involving many social and psychological problems. One of these problems is identity crisis of these people that is not unusual phenomenon to other colonized peoples. In this novel Soyinka's plan to write about some Nigerian intellectuals is a completely well-intended decision.

METHOD

We should not ignore the fact that colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably, and it can therefore be concluded that modern colonialism is a sort of capitalism. Realizing this helps us to understand that we face a multi-layered problem that can be placed under a broad term like this: pre-colonialism, colonialism, postmodernism, tradition, neoliberalism, imperialism, and ultimately capitalism. Therefore, given all the relevant aspects and issues surrounding this complex area, it must be comprehensively described. This complexity stems from the complex nature of postcolonial study and discourse, and is in fact a field of heterogeneous studies, including political, historical and economic sciences which among many other institutions, have their own foundations. Given the heterogeneity and complexity of postcolonial studies, we face a wide range of materials. However, the relevant parts of our topic, solidarity and identity in the interpreters Wole Soyinka should be limited to the concerns expressed on this subject. Relevant topic areas include a large area, so we need to use different books and materials to examine the subject and the thesis. It is true that bringing all these materials and thinkers to write a thesis is not logical, because it would be a summary of facts and knowledge. However, in this process, we can work with these thinkers and think with them, and even respond to their theories. Otherwise, this cannot be what we expect from an academic research. Thus, in all these cases, we will present our answers, and if need to, we can express our objections against these theories and ideas.

NEOCOLONIALISM IN SOYINKA'S *THE INTERPRETERS*

Neocolonialism or its counterpart "neo-imperialism" is a political condition, in which we could discover some of its traces in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, and undoubtedly in other post-colonial works. For the writer of this thesis the term of neocolonial has considerable significance vis-a-vis other two terms because up to this time a few great critics and experts have dug into this conception profoundly. However, there are some exceptions and that is Jean Paul Sartre in his *Colonialism & Neocolonialism*, which for the first time was published in 1964 in French, and the second one, certainly is more prominent and

more influencing in compare to former, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism (The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume I)*, by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman (1979). Thus for this reason we refer to them much more elaborately, among some more instances. Another part of the present study is concerned with experimental aspects of art specifically modern and postmodern aspects. It is not believed that every experimental works is a masterpiece but in fact some of them, at least modern masterpieces, are partially experimental. As for Soyinka's novel, his work contains special complexities which, has made him distinguished from the rest of other fellow African writers. This new type and challenging style of Soyinka's writing persuades the reader to analyse his works with a kind of curiosity and excitement to find more about his idiosyncratic world. Then, another concern of this research is the significance of creating an experimental world which, is hard to grasp by most of "laymen" as Habermas, German philosopher and theorist, entitled it and objected such multilayer and works of postmodern art. Soyinka's *The Interpreters* portrays the reality of neocolonialism in a way that is not easily perceivable but masterfully its effects are implied in the lives and attitudes of its characters. This novel cannot be regarded as one of Soyinka's masterpieces, because many experts consider his plays, as the main area of Soyinka's talent and forte. Soyinka confesses that he is excellent in writing plays and not in novels, and elsewhere in an interview states that his real talent is writing about men rather than women because he believes that this kind of writing is more exclusive for women themselves, so accordingly plays and men are two distinguished talents in Soyinka's professional career.

Although *The Interpreters* is not his masterpiece, for many literary critics he was awarded Nobel Prize partly for writing this significant novel. This work can depict three notable literary and political terms neocolonialism, post-colonialism, and postmodernism which are the central concerns of this study. *The Interpreters* is the first novel written by Soyinka and in compare to his second and probably his last novel, *Season of Anomy* (1973), achieves much more acclaims. New colonialism, and similarly cultural hegemony applied its methods quite indirectly and more importantly without the application of any forces. Each of these comparative elements convince people that these inspired concepts are absolutely correct and following these concepts is the right way of living. If we consider these terms more deeply, cultural domination is the same as previous capitalism and neocolonialism is the less applied term "neocapitalism". Some disagreements are expected here on the term "neocapitalism" which can be highlighted as follows. The main concern and real objective of colonialism have been and will be achieving material objectives. Thus, both capitalism or neocapitalism and neocolonialism seek the same goal, that is, material concerns resorting exploitation and supressing lower class peoples.

Accordingly, Soyinka has shown through his writings this interest to the Nigerian people. He is undoubtedly one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Nigeria or even sub-Saharan Africa whose political writings and activities, their excessive interest in and dedication to Nigerian roots and rites all over the world help his colonized people greatly. By writing a novel like the interpreters, he succeeded in celebrating the Nigerian legends so that he depicts a group of Nigerian mythological gods that can be seen throughout the

novel, through one of his main characters, Cola. The legendary role in this novel confirms Soyinka's interest in country's roots. Moreover, he skilfully argues for this mythical aspect of social problems, most of which arise from neocolonialism, in a way in which readers can see the concern of the author, who is concerned with the important role of Nigerian rituals and customs in a society full of corruption, very clearly. These writers consider that these roots and origins are the essence of their writings and present or re-establish them by all possible means. Soyinka places such fears in the roles of the "protagonist of the collective", the name has been chosen because of the protagonist of the novel or for some of these characters that multiple adversaries, so the attention to the roots of the country is prevalent in almost all novels. Thus, this mythical portrayal illuminates the author's warning to his people not to ignore such a worthy background in the new era of colonialism. In his work, interpreters, Soyinka adds to these contradictions a kind of satirical dialectic towards religion and established beliefs. In one of the most important cases in which the opposite is combined with consideration of the value of religious beliefs, the destruction of the Lazar church appears due to flood and fire. "It started to rain in the early afternoon, washing all the characteristic and submerged huts and smaller market stalls." Soyinka skilfully ends this unrealistic church and its followers, which are undoubtedly representing the true church, by water and flood simultaneously offering a very amazing use of such contradictions. No one can believe the end of religion and all the great values of religious concepts like this.

Neocolonialism is the antithesis of postcolonial discourse. While postcolonialism is making every effort to challenge all kinds of colonialism and exploitation, neocolonialism is struggling hard to neutralize or even overcome these efforts. Thanks to many thinkers and writers in the postcolonial field, many false boasts were divulged to the New and Imperial World. The remaining task is up to colonized themselves. Unfortunately, however, we can note many cases in which these people cooperate with the colonists or the "neo-colonizers", against themselves and in doing so they complicated their situation. This fact can also be classified as a bitter reality that helps the neocolonial leaders achieve their goals through less effort and expenditure. Thus, the influence of these academic researchers can have a warning effect for those who are making unconscious attachments to the mischievous of imperialism as well as these types of informing and enlightening writings. The last irony is that Soyinka deliberately launched the novel of interpreters, and intends to put these characters as interpreters of this novel. In fact, the intended purpose of these "interpreters" fails to explain the events and problems of Nigerian society. Therefore, these are the interpreters who cannot explain the ruined situation in their community. As a matter of consequence, hybridity and identity crisis manifest themselves clearly to the audience of postcolonial and neocolonial, and by doing so warns them not to follow their example.

HYBRIDITY IN SOYINKA'S *THE INTERPRETERS*

For the analysis of hybridity in the postcolonial context, as a context for Interpreters, two terms of hybridity and imitation should be thoroughly explained here. Cultural hybridity takes place when two different cultures, in a postcolonial state, connect one superior and the other inferior, to each other. In this case, the upper culture reduces the inferiority and

desire to imitate it, and irritates the imitator, because following another culture cannot happen simply by imitation. Thus, hybridity is a somewhat derogatory term that occurs most often in postcolonial countries. Something very interesting can be found in a famous proverb about black African cultures and the characters of *The Interpreters*. The point is clear, according to this famous proverb, the "interpreters" of the Soyinka's novel are the Nigerian blacks (crow) who live abroad and in the beautiful Western culture (the Partridge) makes them disappointed and feeling detested towards their culture. Black Africans (the crow) tend to imitate Western countries (the Partridge) and this could generate many psychological problems. Some of the prominent mixed figures in *The Interpreters*, who appear as corrupt academic members of Nigerian universities, are good examples. Some types of hybridities can be ascribed to the novel of Soyinka. Besides general implication there are some more specifications of this term that are mostly applicable to this novel. The first one is 'linguistic hybridity', that is, writing the novel in English while written by an African writer. Therefore, the term 'linguistic hybridity' is possible to be related to *The Interpreters*. Written a novel in English by a non-English writer, more powerfully by employing native mythology supported by many elements of Nigerian mores and rituals, makes this novel as one of the prominent instances of linguistic hybridity. The second type of hybridity, undoubtedly, more significant than the first one is 'literary hybridity' that is, implementing western or postmodern stylistic features in terms of paradoxical aspects. 'Literary hybridity' is excessively applicable to *The Interpreters*, since Soyinka has not rejected any form of postmodern stylistic features. Some instances of these elements include: nonlinear point of view, using many flashbacks and forwards, fragmentation, allusiveness to name a few others. Another example of 'literary hybridity', of course, extremely different from the nature of first definition of 'literary hybridity', is a literary work within the novel, that is, the pantheon of Nigerian gods combined with Christian elements, might be a distinguished sample of 'literary hybridity'. This pantheon, has been drawn on a large canvass by artist as well as intellectual of 'the interpreters', Kola, has created a significant status within the novel that cannot be disregarded easily. The most general meaning of hybridity is when someone has been characterized with more than one identity or attitude. This sense of hybridity is evident in the characters of, again Ayo Faseyi, and Oguazor. These two characters reveal this form of hybridity excellently, when both of them epitomize the sense of being culturally Anglicized. To be simultaneously hypocrite and hybrid, the result would be an appalling form of hybridity. Of course, hypocrisy is distinguished from hybridity in a way that a hypocrite person suffers a psychological and mental disorder, in a way that reveals a severe sense of insincerity. Therefore, the main difference between these two terms is that hybridity is an unintentional sense of duality and uncertainty while hypocrisy is a complete intentional form of duality. Accordingly, the combination of these two types can be regarded as one of the postcolonial psychological severe mental disorder.

CONCLUSION

Most contemporary people are still preoccupied with the term "postcolonialism", which at this time became obsolete and was replaced by another less obvious case, the neocolonialism. This condition is not exempt from any consequences, and its harmful

consequences are even more dangerous and more catastrophic. The new state of colonization according to Nkrumah is the last stage of imperialism and the most dangerous. Certainly, their risks are the consequences of the practice of exploitation over the centuries and are now at their peak of experience and knowledge of this practice. This is not a simple stage that one can ignore carelessly. A large part of the world's population, about three quarters, suffers from these policies. The description of these policies and the portrayal of their results and their consequences to some characters in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* is the place to learn about the new colonialism and its effects much better. The characters of this novel, in fact, are the victims of this condition and since the interpreters in this devastated society cannot even explain their situation or their society. Although the highlight of all these misfortunes is unpleasant, it should clarify the bitter reality, no matter how important it is. All the fame and honour of postcolonial intellectuals, such as Said, Fanon, Bhabha and others, is their ability to portray such problems and the bitter realities of the postcolonial elements. To reflect deeply, the identity of a man or more generally the identity of a nation, one can realize that this is a precious germ looted by colonialism in all its possible forms and through the latest forms, that is, neocolonialism. The coexistence of this final form of colonialism with postmodernism has transformed everything into a very complex one. Without realizing all these harmful actions and without realizing the importance of what the Third World people lose, the influence of colonialism in its many ways will be shockingly puzzling. Needless to say, academic studies in pointed areas can play bright and useful effects. In this research too, the main interest on the issues referred to and their manifestations in the novel has been amazingly covering a whole range of the above problems. The reasons behind the temptation of Soyinka's novel as postcolonial or even more specific colonialism can be justified. This novel can be considered one of the best cases of neocolonialism by presenting a text fraught with postmodern elements along with Nigerian legends, cultural aspects and characters that are examples of mixed individuals. All these additions to the time of writing and publishing the novel (1965), five years after the Nigerian independence, support the above evidence. The stylistic features of postmodernism carried out in this work are other expected issues in this research. In fact, it is not a postmodernist stylistic feature in itself that concerns this research but the reason and justification for its implementation. Interpreter characters were among the most important parts of this research. Almost every issue discussed in this thesis had to do with these Nigerian characteristics of the identity crisis, hybridity, a new generation of interpreters, angry intellectuals and others. These characters consist of a colourful collection of people who can be Soyinka's views on the Nigerian political system, religion, mythology, culture, society, government, etc. Its importance cannot be denied because it provides all we need to know or be aware of after the Nigerian independence and the dominance of neocolonialism. Moreover, they help us to observe what is going on in every part of Nigeria at the time of pure chaos and the personalities whose diverse views create a mixture of beautiful literary masterpieces because of their poetic prose and a bitter piece of new colonial realities. There can be some extractable facts or achievements from this research. The most important, undisputed, is the term neocolonialism.

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