

The Concept of Other: A Crucial Concern in Postcolonial Studies

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Abstract: This study aims at disclosing how postcolonial study describes the concept of *Other*, which is one of the derogatory words with which western imperialists and missionaries castigate the peoples of the colonized nations. To the colonial powers, these peoples are uncivilized, uneducated, savages, uncultured and hence fit to be pushed to the margin of humanity. These superiority complex and stereotypes of the colonial masters make them draw a crazy dichotomy (binary opposition) in the name of *Self* and *Other*. They are the *Self*, while the colonized peoples are the *Other*. Hence, this research tries to define the term *Other* in the face of postcolonial literature studies and to show how it all comes about. The paper will examine the concepts of West and the *Other*, Power, Geographical *Other*, Gender, Segregation, and Exotism, among others, as the factors that lead to the realization of the idea of *Self* and the *Other* established in the European minds.

Keywords: Other, Otherness, Self, Binary Opposition, and Postcolonial Study

Introduction

It is really the mentality of the colonial powers to impose their worldview on the peoples or countries they degraded, rendering them “objects” of observation as well as denying them the authority to see themselves as full individuals. The colonizers, then, see themselves as “subjects” i.e. those having superior identities and experiences. Post colonialism, tries to focus on the attempts of those colonized societies with a view to reasserting and revisiting the identities they claim they have, which include cultural and national identities that were hitherto tarnished and denied for them by colonizers in an attempt to impose theirs.

Postcolonial Study, then, paves way to the understanding of the relationships between the colonial powers and the colonized nations:

It is the study, in general sense, that describes the second half of the twentieth-century as a period in the aftermath of the heyday of colonization...signifying a position against imperialism and Euro-centrism. It yokes a diverse range of experiences, culture, and problems of both colonized (Deepika Bahri, 1996).

In this dimension, post colonialism goes hand in hand with deconstruction in trying to reject those man-made “binaries,” which incorporate fixed perspectives and disowning the rest, decreasing outsiders to the position of “others.” Binary opposition is an artificially fabricated dichotomy established by the white man in terms of race, gender, geographical location, language, culture, religion, and civilization. Colonized countries are seen as existing outside the system of beliefs or values of the colonizers. The imperialists, to them, possess the sense of inexplicable, exotic and strange against the ideas and customs of the “other” i.e. colonized.

It is the psychiatric, philosopher and writer - Frantz Fanon who develops the idea of the *Other* in his writing to be a serious concern in postcolonial studies. “To him is the ‘not me’, he is the *Other*” (Fanon, 1963). Of course the idea of *Other* is something that touches the minds of the postcolonial writers taking into consideration how the word is used by the white man to belittle and stigmatize the Africans and the Colored peoples. Fanon defines the term *Other* from his own perspective. To him if you are not “me” (self), then, you are “he” (other). That means if you don’t belong to a group, you are the “other” and the in-group is the “self.”

According to Hassan (2014), the *Other* is “one who lacks identity, propriety, purity, and literality.” This is an expression of white man’s mentality. Their sinister belief and selfish interest make them to believe that they are “pure”, “literal”, possess “propriety” and “identity” as opposed to the colonized peoples. They say they come to colonized societies not because of material resources but they enlighten the darker peoples i.e. they civilize them (Shmoop, 2021). But this paper sees the white man’s claim as a mental stereotype, they are in the colonized nations not because of enlightenment, but for brutal economic and political exploitations. Africans’ cultures, identities, civilization and other experiences predate the explorations and invasions of the imperialists and missionaries as evident in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

Considering the above views or definitions, the *Other* is, then, somebody who doesn’t have identity, he is illiterate and uncivilized and does not belong to the in-group for the simple reason that he (Other) has a different culture, language and ideology. He (Other) is now seen as a foreign that is far away from the in-group (Self). What is *Self*, then? *Self* is the “me” since the “not me”, he is the *Other*. In other words, *Self* is the in-group, one who is civilized, pure, literate, and possesses identity, propriety and ideology different from that of the *Other*.

Literature Review

This creation of the *Other* is a process of discrimination, which in itself reveals the presence of opposing attitudes or feelings such as love and hate in the minds of the in-group (Self) (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2002, p. 3) (cited in Jean-Francois). Post-colonialism is continuously analyzed as a word that indicates not a "we" talking about or to "them", but a "them" speaking back to an "us". This shows that post-colonial literature study is about categorization of center and margin in one way or the other. Therefore, Post-colonial novels are written to reveal the differing relations of power based on binary opposition thus:

‘Us’ and ‘them’, ‘First World’ and ‘third world’, ‘White’ and ‘black’, ‘Colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ (Kehinde, Ayobami. p. 108) (cited in Jean-Francois, 2008). ‘Self’ and ‘other’, ‘Powerful’ and ‘powerless’, ‘Torturer’ and ‘tortured’, ‘Master’ and ‘slave’, ‘Civilized’ and ‘savage’, ‘Superior’ and ‘inferior’, ‘Human’ and ‘subhuman’ (Jean-Francois, 2008).

This mental stereotype of the white races is an inkling that the Blacks and the People of Color will ceaselessly remain their laborers and slaves. Westerners during the period of colonialism are of the authority to impose their categories over other peoples by reducing them as Others, uncivilized, illiterates, Barbarians, Savages or People of the Color, they belittle the peoples that they could dominate or push to the margin of humanity.

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us”, the “Self”) shapes one or many dominated out-groups (“Them”, the “Other”) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined - presented as a reduction of identity and thus a hope for potential discrimination and exploitation. In simple terms, difference is about the realm of fact and otherness is about the realm of discourse. So, Biological sex is difference, while gender is Otherness. Therefore, the paper would examine the concepts of West and the Other, Power, Geographical Other, Gender, Segregation, and Exotism (among others) as factors that lead to the realization of the idea of Self and Other.

The West and the Other

Certainly the ceaseless anthropology we are facing creates otherness. All groups tend to give themselves image as well as differentiating themselves from others whom they deface. These forms of stereotype, throughout history, vary and are established by discourse and practice. Some classifications are specific to certain societies (such as the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy) and others seem to be global (such as the male/ female dichotomy). All groups, then, create the Self and the Other with their own set of categories. Thus, West in an attempt to create its identity reveals a number of binaries to the making of Self and the Other: male/female, White/Black, heterosexual/homosexual, believer/unbeliever etc. In this dimension, also, a Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1991) is of the opinion that societies build social identities by themselves and such identities are presented as a set of dichotomies:

In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of normality, woman the other of man, stranger the other of native, enemy the other of friend, “them” the other of “us”, animal the other of human, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of expert, foreigner the other of state subject (cited in Zevallos, 2011).

Power

The dissimilarity in power relationships is central to the creation of otherness. Only the dominant group is in the position to enforce the value of its particularity (its identity) and to castigate as well as belittle the identity of others (or their otherness) while establishing corresponding discriminatory measures. Hence, the other of man is woman; the other of the White is Black etc. According to Beauvoir, (1952) and Fanon, (1963) this opposition is not true:

The opposite is not true...out-groups are others...because they are subject to the categories and practices of the dominant in-groups and...unable to prescribe their own norms. Out-groups cease to be Others when they manage to escape the oppression forced upon them by the in-groups...in conferring upon themselves a positive, autonomous identity (‘black is beautiful’), and calling for discursive legitimacy and policy to establish norms, eventually constructing and devaluating their own out-groups (cited in Jean-Francois, 2008).

Considering the above quotation, Beauvoir, (1952) and Fanon, (1963) are of the opinion that the *Others* can liberate themselves from the oppressive force of the in-groups by recreating and glorifying their history, identities, cultures, norms, languages and ideologies in their texts and other literary writings. They should, through discourses, establish their own structures and policies so as to award upon themselves positive and autonomous identities. Once they can do this, they will take the position of the in-groups, whereby pushing them to the position of the out-groups. In other words, the blacks and the coloreds can be *Self*, while the Europeans *Others*.

Geographical Others

They, there, are the Others; we, here, are the Self. The geographical form of otherness, in Ancient Greek, opposed Greek-speakers and Barbarians. A barbarian is a person who does not speak Greek and thus has not mastered the logos (and is not familiar with democracy). His culture is lacking and that he belongs to another civilization. If this otherness comprises of a geographical

dimension, it is because cultural surfaces are divided into supposedly homogeneous blocs (countries, zones, continents etc.) (Jean-Francois, 2008). Thus, a simple example is: we living here in Nigeria are the *Self*, they living there in Ghana are the *Others*. This is so because the geographical locations are different. This is actually the belief of the Europeans after the discovery of Africa and other continents. Hence, West here is the *Self*, while Africa and other continents there are the *Others*. Europe climate is also viewed as another way for the making of *Self* and *Other* dichotomy. Europe climate and natural resources tell that the world's most advanced societies developed there, while extreme climates and lack of natural resources' characteristics of all other parts will lock humanity there to a prior and primitive evolutionary stage as *Others* (Jean-Francois, 2008).

Gender

Western societies embark on social construction of gender, with a view to creating a sense of belonging and identity. They do that through the establishment of binary opposition in order to shape our ideas about what it means to be a "man" or a "woman". Simone de Beauvoir, in the early 1950s, is of the opinion "that otherness is a fundamental category of human thought". Hence, no society ever survives without setting up the other over against itself. Thus a woman is set up as the Other of man. Therefore social ideas about humanity are defined, discussed and legislated against based on masculinity that is socially constructed as a universal norm:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other – Simone de Beauvoir (cited in Zevallos, 2011).

Exotism

Exotism encompasses the most directly form of otherness, as it opposes the abnormality of elsewhere with the normality of here. Exotic, here, is not used to mean exotic place, object, or person. It is the result of a discursive process that comprises of superimposing symbolic and material distance, blending foreign and the foreigner, and it only makes sense from one, exterior point of view (Jean-Francois, 2008). Exotism, here, means it is Westerner who, during the times of exploration then colonization, defines it as elsewhere and thereby negates it as (exotism). The word exotic is now viewed as a synonym to tropical or even colonial. It is out of question to describe Europe as exotic until after decolonization.

Segregation

Segregation is also a factor defining another form of otherness. Confining Jews and Blacks to ghettos deters them from intermingling with Christians and Whites talk less of contaminating them. Also confining "Others" to community life amongst themselves in a degraded ghetto, where poverty and exclusion compound their effects, creates apparent misery and a specific culture. These serve as a sinister move to slow their progress, whereby confirming the dominant group's sense of superiority. Ghetto in itself creates otherness. In the same vein, confining the condemned and the insane in prisons and asylums is another form of segregation. This confinement makes them feel isolated and it worsens their condition, whereby making them look so particular. Women are also treated and segregated as Others through domestic confinement. They are forbidden the access to public spaces and are reduced to domestic role. Here, the society encourages as well as brings life to gender inequality. Thus, man is the *Self*, while woman is the *Other*.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this paper reveals a variety of concepts like gender, power, exotism, segregation, savage, ghetto, geography and West as some of the factors enveloping the idea of *Self* and *Other*, all of which are influenced by colonization, Western ideology and geographical boundaries. These factors make negative impacts on the lives of those described as the *Others* stigmatizing their values and identities in opposition to those of the *Us/Self*.

But, this idea can be applied to any given situation. In other words, it can be applied to a person, place or thing depending upon the context. For example, a classroom if divided into groups A and B. Group A can be the *Self*, while group B, the *Other* since it has different members and laid down guidelines and vice versa. So, also a tin of milk labeled 'best quality milk' can be the *Self*, since any other milk is regarded of less quality and thus reduced as the *Other*. Furthermore, society generally lauds heterosexual form of marriage and therefore sees homosexual or gay marriage with negation. Here, we are having the issue of superiority and inferiority complex; heterosexual, superior (self) while homosexual or gay, inferior (other). Just like the Whiteman, we often prejudice a person because of religion, race or tribe believing ourselves as superior (us/self), while stigmatizing them as inferior (them/other). Moreover, it is human attitude that we want to gain identity and sense of belonging, hence we treat those far away from us as exotic others and therefore, they, there are *Other*; while we, here are *Self*.

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