

“The poetry of Wole Soyinka, Maya Angelou and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha poignantly depicts postcolonial experiences.”



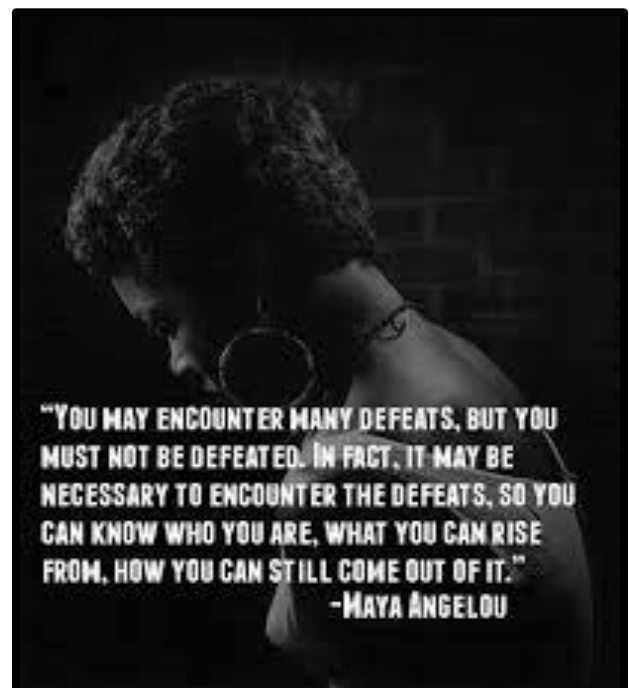
To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have had for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason; I propose to do this by making my writing entirely immoralist and destructive.

-Lakdasa Wikkramasinha



“Power is domination, control, and therefore a very selective form of truth which is a lie.”

-Wole Soyinka



During the 16th century, the world experienced the phenomenon, presently termed as “Colonialism” which is the process of European settlement and political control over certain parts of the world (Margaret Kohn, 2006). Postcolonialism is the study of the era after the European and American decolonization (mid-20th century) and the residual political, socio-economic, and psychological after effects of colonization. In addition, the literary work during this era known as postcolonial literature had been “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.” It is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire (Elleke Boehmer, 1995).

This analysis focuses on such similar postcolonial experiences depicted in the poems, “Don’t talk to me about Matisse,” “Telephone Conversation” and “Momma Welfare Roll” by Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, Wole Soyinka and Maya Angelou respectively. Emphasis has been placed on the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized, and their response towards these experiences.

Lakdasa Wikkramasinha (1941 – 1978) was a Sri Lankan poet who wrote in English and Sinhala. His poetry reflects Sri Lankan lifestyle, culture and society. Post-colonial hybridity and biculturalism are also prominent elements in his poems.

Wole Soyinka (1934 – present) is a Nigerian author, poet, playwright and political activist who promoted native culture and the social order it embodies. Soyinka’s critics “failed to appreciate the radical originality of his approach to liberating black Africa from its crippling legacy of European imperialism. He envisioned a “New Africa” that would escape its colonial past by grafting the technical advances of the present onto the stock of its own ancient traditions. Native myth, reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality, was to be the foundation of the future, opening the way to self-retrieval, cultural recollection, [and] cultural security.” (William McPherson, 1998)

Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Ann Johnson; 1928 - 2014) was an African-American writer, poet and social activist. According to Angelou in her autobiography “I know why the caged bird sings” (1969), “The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.” In her poem “Momma Welfare Roll,” Angelou presents an objective point of view of this concern unlike Wikkramasinha and Soyinka, who has written in the first person. In the poems employed for the present analysis, Soyinka and Angelou raise concerns of “Africans” uprooted from their native land for slavery, and their plight in a foreign land. In contrast, Wikkramasinha deals only with experiences within the boundaries of the colonized nations.

The poets Wikkramasinha, Soyinka and Angelou deal with two different aspects of the theme of identity. In the poem “Don’t talk to me about Matisse,” Wikkramasinha highlights the loss in originality of local cultural identity. He attempts to express his resentment and concern on behalf of all nations that were colonized. This is implied as Matisse and Gauguin represent the French who did not colonize Sri Lanka but other nations including different parts of Africa. All three artists mentioned in the poem are post impressionists who have been influenced and have borrowed artistic visual forms from the cultures of the colonized. Thus, they are used as symbols of both imperialists and European culture. According to the poet the colonizers are portrayed as predators who have preyed on indigenous culture by extracting and copying its originality. The poet accuses them of gaining fame and respect internationally referring to them as “murderers” who “were sustained” by “the beauty robbed of savages.” The poet may also be implying that western cultural identity seen at present is merely a product of the stolen indigenous cultures of the colonized. It is ironic that colonists who consider themselves superior were compelled to steal from those they perceived as “savages.” Moreover, it indicates that the native culture, its simplicity and purity has been tainted through the infiltration of western practices and ideals as the “white-washed mud-huts were splattered with gunfire.” The reference to “Gauguin” as “the syphilis-spreader” further asserts the gradual dispersal of European values and ideals, resulting in scars which prevail in the social conditions of the colonized.

The after-effects of colonialism depicted in Wikkramasinha’s poem have clearly shaped the poet’s attitudes and feelings towards the colonists and the culture they represent. The poem begins with a line conveying a tone of anger and firm rejection of celebrated European artists as well as those who tend to embrace the Western ideals and values.

In the poem “Telephone Conversation” by Soyinka, identity is portrayed as a key determinant of acceptance or rejection by the colonist’s society, or societies influenced by the ideals of colonists. The narrator’s own identity becomes a source of embarrassment as he is constantly interrogated about his complexion by the question “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?” in order to be offered lodging. The simple act of revealing his identity is referred to as a “self-confession”. The narrator is made uncomfortable and unwelcome due to his African descent. The narrator’s reference to himself as “African” without mentioning a specific nationality indicates the devaluing of his own identity.

Similarly, in the poem “Momma Welfare Roll” by Angelou, identity is the key factor responsible for the plight of African women in a foreign land. The inability to be proud of one’s identity and lead a life with dignity is seen in this poem.

The theme of identity is directly linked to the major theme of racism in Soyinka’s and Angelou’s poetry as identity gives rise to Racism which was seen in the postcolonial period and is still prevalent today in a

milder degree. Both Soyinka and Angelou deal with several similar and unique postcolonial experiences which spring from the main issue of racism. However, this theme is conveyed through a different angle in Wikkramasinha's poem.

In "Telephone Conversation," the narrator reveals to the landlady that he is "African" as he hates "a wasted journey" which shows the narrator's awareness of color-discrimination through his personal experiences as it implied that he has been rejected before by the "white" majority. The narrator's revelation of his ethnic identity is followed by a "silenced transmission of pressurized good-breeding" which indicates the instant disapproval expressed only through "silence." It is ironic that egalitarianism fails to be a part of the landlady's accepted "good-breeding." The word "silence" connotes the obliviousness of the majority to the needs of the minority which consists of the colored population. It also suggests the gradual acceptance and conformity to the social norms by the minority. Her doubts regarding the views of the society regarding her acquaintance with an African depict the social prejudices which prevailed during the postcolonial era, and how the lives of people were conditioned to follow these prejudices in an attempt to fit into the society. The question, "plain or milk chocolate?" implies miscegenation which may have given some hope to the narrator of being "Light" colored. The "Red booth" and "Red pillar box" are symbolic of the frustration and anger built up in the narrator due to the inappropriate questions posed by the landlady to decide whether he possesses an acceptable skin tone. The "lipstick coated, long gold-rolled/ Cigarette-holder" is a symbol of the upper class which reveals the disparity in status and wealth between the majority and minority which emanates from issue of discrimination. The image of "omnibus squelching tar" is symbolic of the minority represented by the tar being suppressed and oppressed by the majority represented by the omnibus. The ignorance of the landlady regarding the term "West African Sepia" shows their attitude of superiority and their disregard towards the inferior. The narrator seems to mock the landlady towards the latter part of the poem by describing the varying skin tones of his body to reason out that he has no control over his skin color and to satirize Western societies with racial discrimination. He makes a plea to the landlady to make her reconsider the obvious decision regarding his accommodation,

"Facially, I am brunette, but madam you should see the rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet. Are a peroxide blonde."

The narrator draws the attention of the readers to a very pathetic condition as the minority is judged by society merely by their skin color and not by their humane qualities. The color "black" which generally carries a negative connotation is applied to human beings in reality which is seen as unfair and unjust. It is ironic that those who consider themselves "white", a color which connotes purity and goodness, fails to display those qualities through their actions, feelings or words. The narrator appears to beg for a chance to be accepted by revealing that the palms and soles of his feet, which are generally unnoticeable body parts,

are of a light shade indicating that society ruled by the majority needs to give priority to the qualities and values of a human being rather than viewing them through a stereotypical lens. The title of the poem, “Telephone Conversation” gives the readers a quick insight to the poem as it is symbolic of the distance between the two races. Although money plays an integral role in the lives of people, it fails to make an alliance between them.

The aforementioned postcolonial experiences lead to the sub theme of displacement as the narrator is unable to make independent decisions and lead a life of his choice is depicted through the poem. The narrator is suppress his pride and dignity over a simple act of seeking accommodation although the location was “indifferent,” depriving his basic rights.

Soyinka, attempts to express his feelings and attitudes successfully regarding the challenges that arose due to racism through the narrator. Unlike Wikkramasinha, Soyinka does not express feelings of anger or resentment explicitly. They are conveyed through subtle images and symbols as discussed before to indicate that the narrator is compelled to suppress his own feelings due to the absence of choices in a society where the majority has unyielding power over the minority. The narrator treats the landlady with respect as she is referred to as “madam” and makes a painful effort to be polite despite the rudeness and disrespect leveled against the narrator. It reminds the readers of the harsh realities of the world as it is ironic that those who deserve respect in society are constantly denied of it.

Similarly, Angelou deals with experiences of discrimination. However, she specifically reveals the discrimination of black women in America as she is “too fat to whore” which indicates the limited employment options offered to black women as they were confined to low wage, unskilled jobs during the 20th Century in America (Thomas Maloney, 2002). It also ascertains western ideals of being slim to appear attractive. The woman claims, “They don’t give me welfare, / I take it” which implies her struggle to ascertain her rights. This poem reflects the struggle of a single parent as there is reference to “Her children, strangers/ To childhood’s toys” which unveils deprivation and poverty. The woman’s “jowls shiver in accusation/ of crimes clichéd by/ Repetition” as her anger is directed towards both the majority who have conditioned them within the system and the minority who are compelled to deteriorate their own values due to their conditioned lives as her children know “the slick feel of/ Other people’s property.” Moreover, it suggests that the woman prefers to be independent and has a strong moral conscience despite her circumstances. However, her wish to be independent is a far cry from reality as she walks “bare handed” into a “den of bureaucrats” to get “her portion.”

These lead to the sub theme of displacement as seen in Soyinka’s poem as the woman is made to feel different by society and her freedom is restricted. Angelou portrays the woman as being ‘trapped’ within social norms with no hope for the minority as she “searches her dreams for the lucky sign”. The same

ideology flows in Angelou's poem, "I know why the caged bird sings" which symbolically voice the hardships and yearn for freedom of the minority. Stereotypes and clichés which originate from racism is indicated through "Her arms semaphore fat triangles, / Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips" as the image of a plump woman in a bad temper suggests the western views of "Blacks" being hot tempered, quarrelsome and unattractive.

In contrast, the theme of Racism could be seen in Wikkramasinha's poem through the poet's prejudice towards the west. Wikkramasinha refuses to see anything positive in their culture and ideals as he compares it to a "nude woman" who "reclines forever" on "a sheet of blood." This is metaphoric of the poets' prejudiced notion regarding western culture which he perceives as stained. In addition, art is seen as the medium through which the hidden agendas of the imperialists are undressed. The derogatory terms used to refer the artists and the nationalities they represent contribute to the prejudice seen through the poet's perspectives.

In conclusion, the poems "Don't talk to me about Matisse," "Momma Welfare Roll", and "Telephone Conversation" serves to remind its readers of the experiences during the post-colonial era. The responses towards these experiences are of similar nature despite regions or ethnicity. Nevertheless, their poetry encourage the readers to ponder on the issues created by the remnants of imperialism which are still prevalent in contemporary society.

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