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Happiness in Freedom and the Pursuit of Happiness in Bondage:

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A Postcolonial Study of Gabriel Okara's "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed" and "Once Upon a Time" as Well as David Diop's "Loser of Everything"

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ABSTRACT:

Happiness is a mental state of positive emotions ranging from contentment to joy. It can be pursued and achieved at physical, emotional and intellectual levels by various people. Art is a manifestation of profound joy. In today's world, lack of happiness is the major crisis. The research paper attempts to study Gabriel Okara's (b. 1921) "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed" and "Once Upon a Time" as well as David Mandessi Diop's (1927-1960) "Loser of Everything" in the context of happiness in freedom and the pursuit of happiness in bondage thereby analyzing the emotion of happiness using the postcolonial framework. The paper explores happiness on four distinct philosophical levels namely "Hedonism Theory", "Desire Theory", "Objective List Theory" and "Authentic Happiness" in the pre-colonial societies and the way in which the state of happiness changes to the state of pursuit of happiness in the colonized society thereby describing the onset of the devastating process of colonization and the destruction that is unleashed as a result of it. The paper projects that there is loss of happiness due to conflict of the African cultures with the Western cultures, subjugation of the African people accompanied by loot, rape and pillage, the loss of identity of the African people, their homes being devastated, the imposing of the cultural norms of the colonizer on the colonized and the imposition of the colonizer's language on the colonized. The literature of the African people talking about their state of freedom in the pre-colonial times contrasted with their state during the colonial times and then the promise of freedom in the deplorable state of affairs holds for them. The paper elucidates the resistant descriptions, appropriation of the colonizers' language and the reworking of colonial art-forms in the postcolonial context that provides a self-reflexive angle to the poems discussed above.

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Introduction:

“Postcolonialism” is a phenomenon that emphasizes on the idea of disorientation which is a valuable and productive process that aims at derailing the accustomed trains of thought (McLeod 2). The term “postcolonial” although synonymous to “after colonialism” should not be construed as a historical period. The postcolonial studies which surfaced in 1980s and 1990s as an academic discipline challenged and questioned the well-established assumptions which governed the texts which had to be read and the way in which those texts had to be read in academic and literary circles interfacing them with questions of cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Thus, the complex issues such as “colonial discourses”, “notion of a nation” coupled with the questions of identity complicated the issue further thereby resulting in the empire writing back. The texts namely Gabriel Okara’s (b. 1921) “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” and “Once Upon a Time” as well as David Mandessi Diop’s (1927-1960) “Loser of Everything” (1956) derails the accustomed trains of thought. All the poems are rooted in postcolonial discourse comparing the pre-colonial African societies and the condition of living of the African people to the condition of the African societies and the African people during the heydays of colonialism. In “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, Gabriel Okara remarks that the colonizer mocked at the African culture during colonialism:

You laughed at my song

You laughed at my walk. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 159)

The poet conveys the empowerment of the African people in the postcolonial times by stating “And now it’s my turn to laugh;” (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160). It shows that during colonialism the Europeans had laughed and belittled the Africans on their culture, social set-up and way of life to justify their colonial rule but after the Africans received independence from the Europeans they had the freedom to laugh back on the Europeans thereby asserting their identity as Africans.

The poet also derails the accustomed trains of thought that the Europeans are on a philanthropic mission to civilize the colonized people in this case the Africans as the Eurocentric view advocates that the Africans are primitive and uncivilized thereby masking the exploitative and oppressive colonial enterprise in a philanthropic mission. The poet in the poem emphasizes on the fact that the Africans are integrated with nature although they have an advanced civilization. The African culture is natural in contrast to the artificiality of the European culture:

My laughter is the fire

of the eye of the sky; the fire

of the earth, the fire of the air

the fire of the seas and the

rivers fishes animals trees (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160)

Gabriel Okara in “Once Upon a Time” talks of the Africans in the pre-colonial societies who were genuine and natural but with the onset of colonialism the Africans lose their naturalness and

originality as the colonized Africans are made to learn the artificiality of the colonizers thereby bringing about a change in them taking them far from their originality. In the poem, the poet illustrates it. When an African father tells his son about the change he has witnessed in the African people:

Once upon a time, son,
 they used to laugh with their hearts
 and laugh with their eyes:
 but now they laugh only with their teeth,
 while their ice-block-cold-eyes
 search behind my shadow. ("Once Upon a Time")

The Africans are not the same after the onset of colonialism as they were in pre-colonial times because they have imbibed the alien influence of the colonizers which makes them seem artificial. The poem beautifully subverts the idea of progress and philanthropic mission associated with colonialism as it is exposed as an exploitative process marked by hypocrisy and rapacious greed.

David Mandessi Diop's "Loser of Everything" shows the Africans to be living in an idyllic state in the pre-colonial times as mentioned in the poem:

The sun used to laugh in my hut
 And my women were lovely and lissome
 Like palms in the evening breeze.
 My children would glide over the mighty river
 Of deadly depths
 And my canoes would battle with crocodiles.
 The motherly moon accompanied our dances
 The heavy frantic rhythm of the tomtom,
 Tomtom of joy, tomtom of carefree life
 Amid the fires of liberty. (*Experience* 33)

The poet further describes the condition of Africans during the colonial times and the deterioration that the Africans have undergone:

Then one day, Silence...
 It seemed the rays of the sun went out
 In my hut empty of meaning.
 My women crushed their painted mouths
 On the thin hard lips of steel-eyed conquerors
 And my children left their peaceful nakedness
 For the uniform of iron and blood.
 Your voice went out too
 The irons of slavery tore my heart to pieces

Tomtoms of my nights, tomtoms of my fathers. (*Experience* 33)

This poem too derails the accustomed trains of thought which advocate the process of colonialism to be a philanthropic mission that civilizes the Africans and the African world thereby exhibiting the fact that the Africans had an advanced civilization and they were happy in their previous condition before the onset of colonization.

Colonialism refers to a means of claiming and exploiting foreign lands, resources and people. Enslavement, indentured labor and migration forced many indigenous populations to move out from the places they considered home. Colonialism is a commercial venture of Western nations that developed in the late 17th and early 18th centuries (Judd 3) as the forcible occupation of foreign lands was motivated by the necessity to create and control markets abroad for European goods and for securing the natural resources mainly labor at a cheap rate. It is said to be linked to capitalism. It is evident that political independence of the colonies has not brought economic independence. An example of it may be the dependence of many countries on the developed world for producing cash crops such as coffee or tobacco for multinational companies that reap profit. Gabriel Okara openly talks of the exploitation of African people through their denigration in “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” when he states:

In your ears my song
is motor car misfiring
stopping with a choking cough;
and you laughed and laughed and laughed. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 159)

The poet thus, highlights the humiliating attitude of the colonizer towards the colonized despite the exploitation of Africa on whose resources the colonizer thrives.

In “Once Upon a Time”, Gabriel Okara talks of the artificial manners and attitudes of Europeans accompanied by their rapacious greed for accruing the resources of others in conflict with the African cultural values which are fast disappearing as a result of the cultural exposure to European values. He states that there was a time when the Africans use to shake hands with their hearts but it has changed as now they shake hands without their hearts into it whereas their left hands search the poet’s empty pockets which signifies that the Africans too have learnt to focus on their personal gain after being exposed to the European values thereby relinquishing their own cultural values (“Once Upon a Time”).

In “Loser of Everything”, the poet is candid about the exploitation of the land, its resources and people. Thus, he remarks that with the onset of colonialism and the coming of the colonizers the African people were oppressed, the African women became the objects of the white men’s lust, the children lost their childhood and had to fight wars wearing uniforms of iron and blood thereby showing the oppression of the Europeans on the Africans.

The postcolonial literature has thus emerged in countries which had experienced colonialism due to European colonization and its chief aim is to attempt to counteract the resulting alienation of

the indigenous people from their surroundings by restoring a connection between indigenous people and places through description, narration and dramatization. Gabriel Okara is from Nigeria whereas David Mandessi Diop is from Senegal. Nigeria had been colonized by Great Britain while Senegal by France. These descriptions, narration and dramatization resist or counteract stereotypes, inaccuracies and generalizations created by the colonizers and circulated in educational, legal, political and social texts and settings. In all the above-mentioned poems, the master narrative of colonialism is disrupted through description, narration and dramatization of the condition of the colonized in a colonial set-up. In “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, there is description of the European colonizer belittling or ridiculing the Africans for their primitive way of life and culture which the poet persona talks of when he states:

In your eyes my ante-
natal walk was inhuman passing
your “omnivorous understanding”
and you laughed and laughed and laughed.

You laughed at my song
You laughed at my walk.

Then I danced my magic dance
to the rhythm of talking-
drums pleading, but you shut your
eyes and laughed and laughed and laughed. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 159)

The African poet persona subverts the Eurocentric view that Africans are primitive as he talks of his indigenous magical dance to the beat of the drums the excellence of which goes unappreciated by the European colonizer as he doesn't understand the Africans' culture and way of life. Thus, the African poet persona successfully subverts the stereotypes, inaccuracies and generalizations of the white colonizers regarding the Africans which are in circulation through his descriptions and narration.

In “Once Upon a Time”, the African poet talks about the artificial manners and attitudes of the Europeans, glorifies the African cultural values and critiques the European influence on the Africans which has made them artificial thereby subverting the stereotypes, inaccuracies and generalizations of the Europeans regarding the Africans that they are uncivilized and that the Europeans have to civilize them which is considered to be a philanthropic mission. The poet emphasizes on the fact that the process of civilizing a race or ethnicity introduces artificiality in it. An instance of it is mentioned in the poem:

“Feel at home!” “Come again”:
They say, when I come
again and feel

at home, once, twice,
 there will be no thrice-
 for then I find doors shut on me. (“Once Upon a Time”)

In “Loser of Everything”, the poet subverts the notion of good life associated with the civilizing mission which in turn accompanies the process of colonialism as the poet paints a very dark and dismal picture of the lives of the colonized Africans thereby undercutting the promise of progress and development leading to happiness in the wake of colonialism. He describes the rays of the sun that had set in his hut leaving the place in darkness, the women became the objects of lust of the white colonizers, the children lost their peaceful nakedness and were made to wear the uniform of iron and blood with the onset of colonialism. Thus, this description subverts the promise of good times associated with colonialism.

Happiness is a mental state of positive emotions ranging from contentment to joy. It can be pursued and achieved at physical, emotional and intellectual levels by various people. Art is a manifestation of profound joy. In today’s world, lack of happiness is the major crisis. The texts namely Gabriel Okara’s “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” and “Once Upon a Time” as well as David Mandessi Diop’s “Loser of Everything” explore the state of happiness in pre-colonized African societies, the loss of happiness due to major crisis as a result of colonialism and imperialism thereby leading to the pursuit of happiness in bondage. The three traditional theories of happiness are:

“Hedonism Theory” states that happiness is a raw subjective feeling. A happy life maximizes the feelings of pleasure and minimizes pain. The “Hedonism Theory” has its conceptual roots in Jeremy Bentham’s (1748-1832) concept of “Utilitarianism” (“Happiness: The Three Traditional Theories”). The hedonistic pleasure is experienced on the part of the European colonizer in the poems “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” as well as “Loser of Everything” as the colonizer gets pleasure by subjugating the colonized and masking it in the guise of a philanthropic mission. The pleasure of the European colonizer is based on the power that he derives from keeping the colonized in bondage. Thus, in “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, the European colonizer is shown to be laughing on the African culture and values to justify the process of colonialism. Thus, the African poet-narrator states:

You laughed at my song
 You laughed at my walk. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 159)

In the “Loser of Everything”, the European colonizer derives hedonistic pleasure out of oppressing and persecuting the Africans as it gives them a sense of power. A description of the oppression and persecution is given in the poem that the sun of the Africans went out, their women’s modesty was outraged and their children were made to fight wars and in turn had to give away their peacefulness (*Experience* 33).

“Desire Theory” posits that happiness is about satisfying one’s desires and getting what one wants based on the desire for maximum pleasure and minimum pain (“Happiness: The Three

Traditional Theories”). In “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, the satisfaction of the desire leading to happiness is seen in the fact that the African poet-narrator is empowered to laugh on the European colonizer as he is free from the yoke of colonialism. Thus, he remarks “And now it’s my turn to laugh” (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160). In “Once Upon a Time”, the realization of the desire that the African poet-narrator can return to the original African cultural values by discarding the artificiality of the European influence brings happiness (“Once Upon a Time”).

“The Objective List Theory” of happiness lodges happiness outside of feeling and onto a list of truly valuable attributes in the real world (“Happiness: The Three Traditional Theories”). The three poems namely “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, “Once Upon a Time” and “Loser of Everything” not just project happiness onto a list of truly valuable attributes such as independence and empowerment in the context of postcolonialism. All the three poems are written by African postcolonial subjects talking about the experience of colonialism, the kind of lives they led in the pre-colonial times and their misery during the colonial times marked by the pernicious influence of the colonizers thereby introducing artificiality in the African cultural values. The freedom from the yoke of colonialism not only gives them independence but empowers them which is marked by a change in the attitude of the colonized towards the colonizer and makes them unlearn the artificiality that the influence of the colonizer has brought into their values. They relearn the original African cultural values thereby making them truly happy.

“The Authentic Happiness Theory” posits three distinct kinds of happiness namely the pleasant life (pleasures), the good life (engagement) and the meaningful life. The first two ideas are subjective but the third is partly objective which focusses on serving what is larger and more worthwhile than just the self’s pleasures and desires (“Happiness: The Three Traditional Theories”). In “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, the three distinct kinds of happiness related to pleasant life, good life and meaningful life can be witnessed.

The instance of pleasant life is evident in the fact that the Africans are at home in their land. The poet emphasizes on the fact that they belong to the Earth and the warmth of the Earth gives pleasure to their naked feet thereby foregrounding the fact that they are at home on their Earth:

“Because my fathers and I
are owned by the living
warmth of the earth
through our naked feet.” (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160)

The instance of good life is reinforced by the fact that the Africans are happy and spiritual because they are in communion with nature. This is evident in the instance:

My laughter is the fire
of the eye of the sky; the fire
of the earth, the fire of the air
the fire of the seas and the

rivers fishes animals trees (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160)

The instance of meaningful life is exhibited in the poem in the empowerment of the poet-narrator who is an ex-colonized African subject. His newfound freedom from the colonizer empowers him enough to mock the colonizer.

And now it's my turn to laugh;
but my laughter is not ice-block
ice-block laughter. For I
know not cars, know not ice-blocks. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160)

The instance of pleasant life in "Once Upon a Time" is the pleasure the African poet-narrator gets after laughing and after a genuine handshake.

Once upon a time, son,
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laugh with their eyes: ("Once Upon a Time")

The instance of good life and meaningful life in "Once Upon a Time" is to unlearn the teachings in artificiality imparted by the colonizer and relearn the original African values.

But believe me, son.
I want to be what I used to be
when I was like you. I want
to unlearn all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to relearn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!

So show me, son,
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
once upon a time when I was like you. ("Once Upon a Time")

The instance of pleasant life and good life as seen in "Loser of Everything" is when the Africans live comfortably in their surroundings:

The sun used to laugh in my hut
And my women were lovely and lissome
Like palms in the evening breeze.
My children would glide over the mighty river
Of deadly depths
And my canoes would battle with crocodiles.
The motherly moon accompanied our dances

The heavy frantic rhythm of the tomtom,
 Tomtom of joy, tomtom of carefree life
 Amid the fires of liberty. (*Experience* 33)

The postcolonial literature aims at the assertion of cultural integrity as during colonization the indigenous cultures of those countries were subjected to foreign rule and were often sidelined, suppressed and openly denigrated in favor of elevating the social and cultural preferences and conventions of the colonizers. It aims to restore the richness and validity of indigenous cultures in an effort to restore pride in practices and traditions which were systematically degraded under colonialism. In the process of asserting their cultural integrity, the writers question the assumption of European racial superiority. “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, “Once Upon a Time” and “Loser of Everything” assert the cultural integrity of the Africans and debunk the notion of European racial superiority in various ways namely: the poet-narrator in “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” asserts the cultural integrity of the Africans by describing the African culture which the colonizer refuses to understand and mocks it without understanding it:

Then I danced my magic dance
 to the rhythm of talking-
 drums pleading, but you shut your
 eyes and laughed and laughed and laughed. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 159)

The assertion of cultural integrity in “Once Upon a Time” is when the poet-narrator projects the contrast between the African culture and the European culture thereby proving the superiority of African culture in relation to European culture.

Once upon a time, son,
 they used to laugh with their hearts
 and laugh with their eyes:
 but now they only laugh with their teeth,
 while their ice-block-cold eyes
 search behind my shadow. (“Once Upon a Time”)

The assertion of cultural integrity in “Loser of Everything” is through the description of the idyllic land of the Africans where they lived happily and peacefully till the colonizers came in and destroyed the land to satiate their greed. Thus, the poet mentions:

The sun used to laugh in my hut
 And my women were lovely and lissome
 Like palms in the evening breeze.
 My children would glide over the mighty river
 Of deadly depths
 ...
 Then one day, Silence...

It seemed the rays of the sun went out
 In my hut empty of meaning.
 My women crushed their painted mouths
 On the thin hard lips of steel-eyed conquerors
 And my children left their peaceful nakedness
 For the uniform of iron and blood.
 ... (Experience 33)

There is a concern to revisit history as the colonizers depicted the colonized to be living outside of history in unchanging, timeless societies which are unable to progress or develop without the colonizers' intervention and assistance. The actions of the colonizers including violence against those who resisted colonial rule have been justified by them. Thus, revisiting history from the point of view of those colonized becomes a major preoccupation of postcolonial literature. The poets Gabriel Okara and David Mandessi Diop both revisit history in these poems describing the plight of the Africans during the heydays of colonialism and the effect of neo-colonialism resulting in a pernicious modification of the African cultural values after colonialism comes to an end. In "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed", the poet talks about the European colonizer ridiculing the African colonized and finally, the freedom from the yoke of colonial rule which empowers the colonized. Thus, the poet-narrator comments on the European colonizer:

You laughed at my dance
 You laughed at my inside.

You laughed and laughed and laughed.

Moreover, the poet-narrator states on behalf of the African colonized:

And now its my turn to laugh;
 but my laughter is not ice-block
 ice-block laughter. (*Literary Vistas Vol. III* 160)

Thus, the fact that now the colonized is empowered to laugh on the colonizer which shows that attainment of freedom had empowered the colonized to provide a befitting reply to the colonizer who had oppressed and exploited the colonized in the name of civilizing them.

In "Once Upon a Time", the poet-narrator does revisit history in terms of describing the neo-colonialism which is psychological in nature and has resulted in the pernicious modification of African cultural values thereby introducing artificiality in them. He laments the fact that the laughter of the Africans lack warmth and their handshakes are not out of goodwill which is the result of the European influence. The Africans have learnt to be artificial because of the influence of the European colonizer which is an instance of neo-colonialism that is psychological in nature. It shows that the

African tradition of values is pure as compared to the European tradition of values which undercuts the idea of the need of a civilizing mission. Thus, the poet-narrator comments:

And I have learned too
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart. ("Once Upon a Time")

It shows that purity and sincerity of the African cultural values have got affected because of neo-colonialism.

In "Loser of Everything" the poet-narrator revisits history to describe the glorious past of the Africans again subverting the idea of the need of a civilizing mission. He describes the idyllic surroundings in which the Africans use to live in a blissful state:

The sun used to laugh in my hut
And my women were lovely and lissome
Like palms in the evening breeze.
My children would glide over the mighty river
Of deadly depths
And my canoes would battle with crocodiles.
The motherly moon accompanied our dances
The heavy frantic rhythm of the tomtom,
Tomtom of joy, tomtom of carefree life
Amid the fires of liberty. (*Experience* 33)

And then the poet-narrator describes the harm that the colonizers have affected in the name of progress and development which is a part of the civilizing mission thereby converting the idyllic place to a barren heath.

Then one day, Silence...
It seemed the rays of the sun went out
In my hut empty of meaning.
My women crushed their painted mouths
On the thin hard lips of steel-eyed conquerors
And my children left their peaceful nakedness
For the uniform of iron and blood.
Your voice went out too
The irons of slavery tore my heart to pieces
Tomtoms of my nights, tomtoms of my fathers. (*Experience* 33)

The postcolonial literature also aims at appropriating the colonizers' language although many of the nations which were colonies have indigenous languages but the postcolonial writers aim at writing in the colonizers' tongue or language. Both Gabriel Okara and David Mandessi Diop are

postcolonial poets expressing their Afrocentric views regarding the white colonizers in English which too is essentially the language of the colonizer.

The aim of postcolonial literature is to reshape or remold the imported colonial art forms to incorporate the style, structure and themes of indigenous modes of creative expression such as oral poetry and dramatic performances. “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed”, “Once Upon a Time” and “Loser of Everything” are poems which are written by Africans such as Gabriel Okara and David Mandessi Diop in an art form that is primarily European but it has been domesticated by these poets to convey their Afrocentric ideas related to the European colonizers in the postcolonial context. The Africans had a tradition of oral poetry but the idea of written poetry had been borrowed from the West and was domesticated.

All the poems project the pre-colonial times to be a state of comfort and happiness for the Africans and the onset of colonialism leading to the entry of the European colonizer to be an initiation of the miseries of the colonized thereby making them unhappy and engaging them in a pursuit of happiness. The end of the process of colonization brings freedom and empowerment to the Africans thereby making them happy. The assertion of the cultural integrity and postcolonial identity of the Africans makes them realize their self-esteem. It is achieved through the subversion of the colonizer’s ideology/ies and by co-opting the colonizer’s language/s as well as their art forms.

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