

## The Dislocation of Identity: An Analysis of Johnson's Identity in Cary's *Mister Johnson*

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the dislocation of cultural identity as a result of the hegemony of the European-imposed cultural identity. It demonstrates the destruction and loss of African cultural identity through the character of Johnson in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. I believe that the study makes a significant contribution to literature because it highlights the effects of colonialism in Africa especially on identities. The analysis proves how identities were altered because of colonialism. It is an evaluation of the ambivalent attitudes and variations in the light of ambivalence along with quoting many examples that show this theme clearly.

**Key words:** Identity, Dislocation, Colonialism, Ambivalence, Duality

*Those who discovered and conquered other lands were entitled to them, their riches, and their spoils. The conquered people could be treated as slaves, banished to other lands, or assimilated into the society and institutions of the conquering people*

— *Vine Deloria Jr. (1983)*

### INTRODUCTION

European colonization has left an indelible mark on history, forever altering the very essences of both the imperial nations and the colonized countries. Colonization is the supremacy and control of what is regarded as inferior. The colonizers imposed political, economic, and cultural domination over a society of "others." The colonial empires imposed their dominance over vast territories, where they exploited and controlled labor, resources, and the lives of indigenous people. The effects of colonialism on the world have lingered until the present day.

The case of identity dislocation is part of the dark legacy of colonialism. Colonialism often destroyed the cultures of the colonized by replacing them with an implanted, partial version of the cultures of the colonizers. This was carried out with the goal of "civilizing" the indigenous peoples, and in this process they dismantled native cultures by imposing their own cultural values, languages, and ways of life upon the local people. However, by installing new values and ideologies in the colonies, the beliefs and values of the colonizers themselves were in turn altered. Said states that the colonizer, by creating the "other" which was to be colonized, created his own identity in opposition to that of the colonized

(Said 71-74). On Joyce Cary's novel, *Mister Johnson*, which will be examined in this paper, Achebe states that the Nigerian character, Johnson, inspired him to write about Nigeria and how colonialism affected African lives:

One of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary's novel, set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of - not of the country - but even of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside. (Innes 12).

### THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY DISLOCATION IN MISTER JOHNSON

The identity loss among Africans in colonized nations through the hegemony of the European-imposed cultural identity is further demonstrated by the following desire of Achebe to "help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (Achebe 58-59). This paper thus examines the destruction and loss of African cultural identity through the character of Johnson in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. I chose this novel because it hasn't been discussed in details especially the character of Johnson.

*Mister Johnson* is one of Joyce Cary's most notable and interesting novels. It is set in Nigeria during the British colonial era in the 1920s. The novel revolves around the character from whom it takes its name. It is the story of a southern "native clerk" named Johnson, who is posted to a small outstation in northern Nigeria called Fada. The culture

of both the indigenous inhabitants of Fada and his European masters was very different to his own, as Fada was very far from his hometown geographically. Johnson was posted to assist Rudbeck, a British magistrate hired to build a 100-mile road across the country. Johnson reveals his beliefs regarding nationality and self from the very beginning of the novel. He dresses in an all-white suit and hat, comparable to Rudbeck. He considers himself English and even insists upon having his wedding ceremony conducted in English and his wife wearing a western wedding gown.

Johnson, although not British, believes himself to be. He thinks of himself as a proud English citizen:

England is my country. Oh, England, my home all on de big water. Dat King of England is my King, De bes' man in de worl', his heart is too big.

Oh, England, my home all on de big water. (21)

Johnson's absurd loyalty and submission to the oppressor is truly naïve and even comical, although the events of the novel take a tragic turn at the end. The novel begins with an account of the young clerk's romance, and moves dramatically to his death by the "humane" hand of his friend and employer, Mr. Rudbeck.

The novel depicts the relationship between the powerful colonists and the oppressed Africans. The supremacy of one race over the other is demonstrated by the relationship between the British and the locals. The novel discusses the injustice, inequality, and discrimination that the people of Africa were subjected to under British imperialism. The conquered people of Africa suffered greatly under the colonial rules, which treated them as "uneducated," "savage," and "uncivilized." Fanon describes this dilemma in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he says:

I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos -- and the white man, however intelligent he may be, is incapable of understanding Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo. I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth. (27)

In addition to black and white, there exists a third category that is "not white not quite." In Bhabha's words, the mimic was "almost the same but not quite," "almost the same but not white" (127-128). This is clear in the satirical representation of the protagonist, who is a simple product of colonial rule. Ashcroft et al. state in *The Empire Writes Back* that "more than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1). Because of colonialism, identity is not fixed and leads to confusion. Hall proposes that cultural identity "searches for images which impose an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation...(cultural identities) under far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power" (224, 225). Coulmass believes that "identity is a multi-layered dynamic process rather than an inborn trait that cannot be helped. Identities are partly given and partly made" (178).

### The Effects and consequences of colonialism on locals

Fanon, in *Black Skins, White Masks*, examines the consequences of colonialism. He explains the experience of having to wear "white masks" to get by Europe and of having to "bend one's own identity so as to appear to the colonizer to be free of all taint of primitive native traits" (Ryan 117-118). Macleod observes that "hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy-paving. Instead, they remain perpetually in motion; pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription" (219). Bhabha also discusses hybridity, believing that it comes from the "interweaving of elements of both colonizer and colonized" forming "a third space" that is "in between the designation of identity." Moreover, "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains the difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). The impact of colonialism on an individual's ambivalence and the loss of identity leads to an imitation of the colonizers' identity.

Johnson refers to England as his home. He sings of England to fellow villagers, who also see him as distinguished by his white suit that makes him part of the "civilized," "great" world. Johnson's anglophilia reflects him as a "caricature," as Achebe states (Rowell 183), as he even adopts English table manners and behaviors. Johnson throws extravagant parties, funded by accumulating debt, pretends to know the king of England, and believes his traditional, African bride will wholeheartedly accept English culture. His willingness to even accept abuse from English gentlemen who treat him poorly is demonstrated throughout the novel. He imitates the English with the intention of modelling himself after with what he believes to be "superior." Bhabha refers to this behavior as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (6).

Through his protagonist's foolishness, Cary demonstrates how imperial rule affected the people of Africa. He reaffirms how the European ideals of colonialism were unjustified and based on prejudice. Cary portrays Johnson as energetic and young but dislikes work and seriousness. He sings, dances, and falls into debt for the sake of his masters. Cary uses Johnson and other Nigerian characters to emphasize the absurdity of British and European stereotypes. The novel offers such an interesting perspective on the colonial mind-set and how Nigerian culture and the potential of its people were overlooked. Johnson's story reflects the misconceptions of the British and of other imperial societies. In Cary's political essay, "The Case for African Freedom," he states that when he was an officer in Nigeria, he was like the other white colonists. He had no clue or idea of the natives' suffering. Like other colonists, he simply assumed that they were primitive and savage.

### The portrayal of Johnson and the natives in Mister Johnson

The method of writing that Cary uses in the novel reflects an outsider's perspective. By using the third-person perspec-

tive, Cary conveys an outsider's understanding, portraying the British and Nigerian perception of the other. Johnson is seen differently from the other groups in the colony. As he is from the south of Nigeria, is considered a foreigner by the people of Fada, whose outlooks and behaviors differ from his own. He is also seen as a bothersome thief to the British officials Blore and Galloup, and a failure to his own wife.

Cary believes that the British often misunderstood the potential of the colonized peoples, especially government officials like Blore and even the beloved Rudbeck. Blore demonstrates this shortsightedness in his treatment of Johnson. Blore hates Johnson, and in this way, his character is a symbol of the British colonial system, which cannot tolerate anyone or anything that is different. Cary describes Blore as follows:

He likes all old things in their old places and he dreads all change, all

innovation. To his mind, a messenger in a white gown, even if he speaks and writes English, is a gentleman; but a clerk in trousers, even if he can barely do either, is an upstart, dangerous to the established order of things. (12)

Therefore, to Blore, Johnson's innovation and zeal must be quashed. The colonists think that Johnson's thoughts and actions are often farfetched, impetuous, and unrealistic, just like his spontaneous singing and dancing. Johnson, nevertheless, is unrealistic and dreamy in many ways. He daydreams and fantasizes about many things, like being the best friend of Rudbeck. Johnson says of Rudbeck, "He my frien'—soon as he see me—he smile and say, 'Why is dat you, Mister Johnson?. God bless you, Mister Johnson—I 'gree for you—I pray for you'" (19). He also fantasizes about a conversation with his wife, Bamu, and how she would adore him and embrace civilized, English ways. He tells her that he is a rich and powerful government clerk, and that he will make her a great lady. She shall be loaded with bangles, wear white women's dress, sit in a chair at table with him, and eat off a plate. He states "Oh, Bamu, you are only a savage girl here—you do not know how happy I will make you. I will teach you to be a civilized lady and you shall do no work at all" (6). His imagination of Bamu extends further. He imagines her in a blouse and skirt, shoes and silk stockings, with a little felt hat full of feathers, and makes a jump of two yards. All the advertisements of stays, camisoles, and nightgowns in the store catalogues pass through his imagination, and he dresses Bamu up first in one and then in another. He then imagines himself introducing her to his friends, as "Missus Johnson" (7).

Cary explains that these ideas came to Johnson's mind because of the missionary education he received:

But he will not only make her a civilized wife; he will love her. He will teach her how to attend parties with him; and how to receive his guests, how to lie down in one bed with a husband, how to kiss, and how to love. Johnson's idea of a civilized marriage, founded on the store catalogues, their fashion notes, the observation of missionaries at his mission school, and a few novels

approved by the S.P.C.K., is a compound of romantic sentiment and embroidered underclothes. (7)

In a memorably comical scene, Johnson attempts to put an English wedding dress on his new bride, who has just experienced a strange, English wedding ceremony and cannot take anymore. However, Bamu acted in the opposite way from that which Johnson had fantasized about, by attempting to escape from his attempts to dress her in western clothing.

In addition to his dreams of a westernized wife, Rudbeck epitomizes for Johnson the virtue of an English gentleman and military man. Cary writes:

Rudbeck, new to the service, has treated Johnson, his first clerk, with the ordinary politeness which would be given to a butler or footman at home. He has wished him 'Good morning,' hoped that he enjoyed his holiday, sent him a bottle of gin for the new year, and complimented him once or twice on a neat piece of work. Johnson therefore worships Rudbeck and would willingly die for him. He thinks him the wisest, noblest and most beautiful of beings. The very look of him now on the stoop gives him such a shock of joy and relief that he bursts into tears. Johnson, after all, is only seventeen and completely alone. He falters, 'Oh, Mister Rudbeck, may God bless you—I pray for you all time.' (13)

Johnson even quoted Rudbeck when he was negotiating the dowry with Bamu's family, as follows: "What? So you take me for a fool—do you know who I am?—I'm the friend of Mister Rudbeck. Do you think a big man like me, Johnson, is going to be swindled by a lot of savages?" (17) He continues the self-flattery by talking about his beautiful, patent leather shoes as a piece of the country he loves so dearly and as any well-bred, English gentleman would do:

Shoes—how dare you? My shoes are English shoes—the very best shoes—they're not for savage people—bad thievish people like you.' (17) Johnson waves the shoes at them and laughs. 'Dem pagans tink dey tief ma shoes, but I too much for dem. I say, I know you, you savage people, all a lot of tieves. I no stan' no nonsense—I tell my friend Mister Rudbeck put you all for prison. (17)

Johnson even curses himself when he steals during his crisis from the treasury and lies to Rudbeck about it:

You fool chile, Johnson, you bigges' god damn silly fool in de whole worl' ...—I like to kick you to hell, you idjit, I tink I give you damn good hiding—serve you right if you done for. Dat's what I say, serve you damn right, you silly, god damn bloody fool chile, yam-headed son of a hole. (44)

Perhaps the greatest expression of Johnson's devotion to his colonizing country is his admiration of Rudbeck. Because Rudbeck acts in a personal manner toward him, instead of despising him as a "negro," Johnson always declares Rudbeck as his friend: "I'm the friend of Mister Rudbeck" (17). The first several pages of the novel make it clear that Johnson "worships Rudbeck and even when Rudbeck steals, Johnson does not see it as a crime since it is in the name of progress to pay for a trade road. To Rudbeck, the road "shall change everything and everybody..." and bring "wealth and opportunity for good as well as vice," that it



is “the revolution” (107). Although the road brings trouble to Fada, Rudbeck and Johnson believe it will also bring prosperity and “civilization” to the region and therefore any means should be taken, regardless of their legality. Both Rudbeck and Johnson embezzle funds from the treasury and other sources to pay for the road. However, it is Johnson who is punished by death for their crimes at the hands of the man and country he adores.

Despite the zeal that Johnson feels for the English, he is met at the end with betrayal; this marks the beginning of Johnson’s path to execution. Johnson tries to conform to the English codes of behavior and values that alienated him from his people and society. Johnson tried to help Rudbeck, his master, to get money for building roads in Fada. To impress his master, he looks for illegal ways of obtaining money. He suggests to Rudbeck to fiddle with the accounts to filch some money; after all, it is for the sake of progress. However, Rudbeck reproves him by declaring that he is not an embezzler:

‘I see, embezzlement of public funds. You want to get me kicked out of the service with seven years’ imprisonment on top? That’s the idea.’

‘Oh, no, sir.’

‘I may be a thief, Mr. Johnson, but I’m not an embezzler.’ (50)

Rudbeck, nevertheless, is an embezzler, as he stole funds from the treasury for the construction of the road, which he was sent home for by the government when they discover his crime. Johnson does not realize the gravity of his crime, as he believes it is in the service of Rudbeck and the all-important road, the construction of which would fulfill the imperial value of progress. When the new official, Tring, accuses Johnson of embezzlement, Johnson explains that “it’s for the road—Mr. Rudbeck’s road...” (70) and runs off “repeating to himself in astonishment, ‘But he didn’t understand...all de money spent for de road’” (70). Johnson believes that the ends justify the means, as the road will bring all the good that Rudbeck promised: the “motors,” trade, and prosperity.

Despite Johnson’s potential and dedication to England, he is in the end seen as an aberration that England cannot tolerate. Rudbeck takes credit for Johnson’s wish for his hero and friend to execute him. Rudbeck feels “free in the inspiration which seems already his own idea” that he “couldn’t let anyone else” execute Johnson (142). These last words of the novel by Johnson’s idol and “best friend” usurp Johnson’s creativity. In his article “Nigerian representation in Joyce Cary Mister Johnson” Tenpenny states that “To an author who understands the basis of human life as a “free mind,” there could not be a more dreadful ending than one in which that freedom of invention is taken away. (22)“Rudbeck, English culture, and empire betray Johnson and then in the cruelest twist take his ideas for their own.

In conclusion, Cary critiques European colonial misconceptions and misunderstanding of colonized people and cultures through this tragicomedy novel. The protagonist demonstrate how colonialism affects identities of the col-

onized. Because the character of Johnson hasn’t been discussed in details, I chose to write about him and to examine the destruction and loss of African cultural identity. I believe that the study makes a significant contribution to literature because it highlights the effects of colonialism in Africa especially on identities. The analysis proves how identities were altered because of colonialism. Cary uses also stereotypes to show the Europeans’ fear of change and how innovative and creative people such as Johnson, the protagonist, represented a threat to the colonizers’ hegemony. The tragic tone of the novel’s ending emphasizes the role of Mister Johnson’s character in dissolving European readers of their inaccurate ideas about the African colonies. Walsh describes it as “Cary laments the unseen, creative potential of his protagonist, as Mister Johnson shows as “in its comedy the rich human potential of the continent and in its tragedy the manifold ways in which this potential is mocked and smothered” (109).

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