



Cultural and Identity conflicts in Helen Oyeyemi's 'The Opposite House'

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Abstract:

Helen oyeyemi is Black British writer who has migrated to England from Nigeria. In Black British literature, problems of identity and immigration are extremely important. Oyeyemi's writing focuses on the suffering of immigrants. Cultural and identity conflicts is at the heart of oyeyemi's literary works. Identity and culture distinguish one person from another. Culture and identity leads to disintegration of self. It creates impact on person's psychology. In contemporary Black British literature the loss of identity and search for it has been recurring issue. This paper examines how reconciling more than one cultural identity is problematic as living in between creates conflict within the individual, leading to self's abjection.

Keywords: *Culture, Identity, psychology, Black British literature, Immigrant, Language*

Introduction:

Helen Oyeyemi is one of the prominent Black British writers in Britain. Her writings have enthralled with unique style, great themes and mystic and magic elements to prove her words. All her works have wide ranging subjects and possess prolific references to Nigerian mythology and explore the Nigerian era's cultural and geographical background. She has embedded culture and identity crisis, memories of homelands and feelings of displacement with horror and gothic narrative style. The elements of surrealism and magic realism are prominent in her writings.

Conflict is described as “a struggle over values and scarce status, power and resources”. (Boulding). Culture plays important role in the development of identity. Oyeyemi's characters from 'The Opposite House' are immigrants. Hence, they have come across multiple cultures which leads to cultural and identity crisis. Culture is connected to identity because membership in certain groups is emotionally binding for individuals, such collective identity forms individual identity. In short, culture links individual and collective identities. Also it defines potential boundaries between social groups. Cultural differences like religion,

gender, language and race are the root cause of conflict in society and it creates impact on identity construction. This is well portrayed in the novels of Helen Oyeyemi.

The Opposite House :

The Opposite House (2007), explores the intersection of different forms of oppression based on ethnicity, class, and gender. The novel is concerned with the death of certain cultural practices and double-displaced peoples and traditions. Maja a black Cuban has immigrated to London when she was five years old. Now, after twenty years later, Maja is a singer, in love with Aaron, pregnant, and haunted by “her Cuba.” When she grows in London, she has struggled to negotiate her history. She thinks that speaking Spanish or English made her less of a black girl. But she is unable to find herself in her roots. It seems whatever is left is silence. During this, distance from Cuba has deepened Maja’s mother faith in Santeria the fusion of Catholicism and Western African Yoruba religion. But it also divides the family as her father rails against his wife’s superstitions and the lost dreams of the Castro revolution.

On the other side of the reality wall, Yemaya Saramagua, a Santeria emissary, lives in a somewherehouse with two doors: one opening to London, the other to Lagos. Yemaya is troubled by the ease with which her fellow emissaries have disguised themselves behind the personas of saints and by her inability to recognize them. The novel explores theme

of displacement, culture, identity crisis and their impact on both physical and psychological level.

Cultural and Identity Crisis :

Helen Oyeyemi, in ‘The Opposite House’ demonstrates the national identity and isolation of the Other. It explains that adopting more than one cultural identity is problematic because living in-between creates conflict within the individual, leading to the self’s abjection. When cultural Others are excluded from British history, from a sense of Britishness located in the past, the Other faces psychological disorder, While seeking their national heritage beyond British Borders. In this context concept of displacement becomes important which emphasizes how one struggles with Cultural and identity conflicts.

Maja is the protagonist of ‘The Opposite House’. Adopting two or more cultural and national identities becomes challenging for her. Living in London, she is a Black Cuban. She has Cuban and West African roots. Due to her complex heritage, she is placed as Other and is in search of her identity. Each individual is Unique and uniquely placed in the social structure and it is apparent to state the uniqueness. Individuality is shaped through identity and being identical to others in a new cultures and new homes invokes the natural treatment of the self.

Language and culture are closely associated. Language is considered as a symbol of identity. Language has dual function. One is to communicate and other

is to carry culture. Maja thinks that speaking Spanish or English made her less of a black girl. But the occupation of an in-between space placed Maja as the Other in the society in which she lives. Maja has hybrid identity which has emerged from her past experiences. She is a black Cuban immigrant who lives in London. Her parents are from West African and Cuban heritage. As Maja has migrated when she was child, her identity remains unfixed. It is reflected through her words in 'The Opposite House',

I was seven years old when we came here. I've come to think that there's an age beyond which it is impossible to life a child from the pervading marinade of an original country, in another country, another language like hot oil scalding the first language away. I arrived here just before that age. (TOH 12)

Maja gets the treatment of Other. She feels excluded one from British history. This creates question in her language adaption. As she has hybrid identity, she can choose only one language. She challenges her potential to express her hybridity. She says,

"I start to hum, and to speak tunefully to myself, the way I do when I'm climbing into song. I am nervous because it's been a few days and the most terrifying thing for someone whose vocal chords are strung for both song and speech would be to reach into the dark between one and the other for melody and find nothing. I find it". (TOH 44)

From this we come to know that Maja's in-between Cuba and Britan is

difficult. It shows lack of certainty and creates identity conflicts. She searches her black identity which depicts her childhood in Cuba. But it rejects any specific label. In 'The Opposite House', there is one incident where Maja reacts to the discrimination she faces from her African classmates as they examine her roots '[Cuban] with another girl. They compare,

"You know, a lot of the others have been saying that out of you and Dominique, we like you better. You're all right. You're roots.

I must have seemed stupid to her. I said "Huh.."? I thought a black girl was a black girl. Why did it come down to a choice between me and Dominique, and not any of the other girls? We were both black without coming from the right place. We were the slave girls from Trinidad and Cuba; not supposed to speak Spanish, not supposed to speak English either". (TOH 97)

These words depict Maja's struggle to fix her language on which her identity is decided. Also she has to fix her identity and define herself when she is isolated from larger community. The reason behind this is Maja does not fit in her friends' group identification because her blackness is not similar to theirs. While living in Multicultural land, she struggles to express her identity which is denied by her new home. She described her parents speaking "their voices smoothed to calm, placeless melody through academial" (TOH 22)

Here language is used as a tool to associate with the past rather than to

isolate Other subject. Maja's internal conflict is a result of her fear of uncertainty between Cuban and British culture. This conflict starts when she is forced to associate with the British national identity. She is not willing to do so. She says,

“I need my Cuba memory back... I think I will pretend that I am not from Cuba and neither is my son.”(TOH 169)

Maja believes in having strong ties with her roots. Her statement shows her strong link to Cuba. Maja has moved to multicultural land and has conflict regarding culture and identity. In this situation not having one language can cause feeling of anomie. This creates sense of betrayal in her where on one hand she is pushed to accept British nationality but on the other she cannot separate herself from her Cuban roots.

In case of Maja, there is a conflict of culture and identity. According to Sujala Singh, “the very search for the past in each of us changes the past as we go along, so that the lost thing is not the same now, as it was before”. Referred to this statement, Maja is searching her “Black Identity”. This effort to seek her identity in Cuban roots becomes problematic.

Conclusion:

Helen Oyeyemi's ‘The Opposite House’ depicts Cultural and identity crisis

faced by immigrants. This conflict is shown at various levels through the character of Maja. Her existence at Multicultural land leads her to cultural conflict. Culture connects individual and collective identities. Oyeyemi shows Maja's identity unfixed. Maja faces multiple problems when she tries to fix her identity. Language plays important role in identity formation. Placed as Other, Maja speaks neither English nor Spanish well. Therefore language and culture becomes barrier in her search for identity. Her complex heritage and migration to London from Cuba results into the cultural and identity conflict.

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