

Lost Eden – Springboard to tell the Story of Another Fall?

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Myth serves symbolic purposes in modern texts and often, narrates the stories of eras gone by, peopled with divine and semi divine beings remembered nostalgically. In all the novels studied, in the present paper, the struggle with colonialism assumes heroic proportions for the protagonists within the limitations of their contexts. The loss of an idyllic society, in the not so distant past is described and the fall from grace is experienced by the protagonists along with their communities.

The past described is of a people, close to nature, innocent of the wiles and corruption of the Western way of life, happy in an idyllic society. There is a loss of identity and dignity that they experience soon after their encounter with the West. This ambivalence is often compounded by accompanying guilt, again reminiscent of Adam's position after the Fall. The postcolonial moment serves as a springboard to examine the pain and trauma of the colonial encounter itself in these texts. The loss of an Eden in the past serves as a trope to examine the colonial encounter depicted by these writers.

The texts chosen to be studied in the light of the views expressed are *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *Temple of My Familiar* by Alice Walker. The texts chosen enact covertly the story of the Fall, and evoke the same emotions but towards different ends.

The colonial encounter depicted differently in these texts plays a pivotal role and signifies a Fall from grace, alienation and damnation for the protagonists and their communities. There is a "looking back" that occurs in these texts, before the "writing back". Looking back generally is at a lost Eden, a pristine environment, idyllic in quality, usually marking a better state of being in terms of individual wholeness and the community's dignity and its wholeness.

The colonial encounter, akin to the Fall, results in a fracturing of the community and individual psyche. It signifies a traumatic event that emasculates and calls into question an entire world view, demeans a culture and lifestyle and strips them bare of any vestiges of dignity. This Fall is not only in the eyes of the colonizer but a Fall from the grace of their gods as well, in that these protagonists feel desecrated and abandoned by their own traditions and values. They are distressed to find that members of their communities are often duped into believing that they can be redeemed by aligning with the colonizers. Much later, realization dawns but by then they have become

“mimic men”(to borrow V.S. Naipaul’s term). They find themselves alienated in much worse ways. Ironically, the temptation before the Fall comes in the form of their own traditional practices like hospitality or compassion to outsiders. The protagonists find themselves in a position where they have to sacrifice all that they have to save their identities and that of their communities in a Christ like manner.

The poet Oodgeroo in the poem titled, “The Past” writes:

“Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within”.(86)

These lines are a poignant reminder about the past and its continued role in the present and the shape the future takes. They also highlight the critical role memory plays in recovering the past, so essential a process in a people’s attempt to piece together the shreds of dignity and identity, both of which come under attack in colonization. “Remembrance is the key to redemption”, *Inscription on a memorial to Jews who died in World War II concentration camps, Lands End, San Francisco*(Walker, 336) These lines from Alice Walker’s novel assign a critical role to memory in the process of redemption. The African thinker/writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong’O writes, “the aim of any colonial mission is to get at a people’s land and what that land produces”. (qtd. in Nesbit, para 1, lines 2-5) To achieve this objective, the colonial power gains control of the cultural environment: education, religion, language, literature, songs, forms of dances and every form of expression to finally control outlook, people’s self-image and their very definition of self. As Gayatri Spivak defines it, it is a process of “othering” – “a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes”. (qtd. in Templeton, para 4, lines 1-3) Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have adequately demonstrated that rereading colonial texts is a key part of postcolonial studies and this enables the critic to see processes like “othering” at work. Neil Templeton, a critic points out that, “...rewriting colonial texts in the form of “writing back” is potentially even more important, granting postcolonial authors agency to resist and correct myths propagated through literature upon which colonial relationships have been premised.”(para 10, lines 8-12)

The texts the present paper seeks to examine, namely, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Alice Walker’s *Temple of My Familiar* surely write back and certainly return the gaze unflinchingly. As critics of postcolonial texts, we need to perceive the reworking of myths that the writers do covertly and overtly as well. The colonial encounters depicted differently in the novels studied play a pivotal role and signify a Fall from grace, alienation and damnation for the protagonists and their communities.

According to Julie Sanders, in her essay, “Adaptation and Appropriation” “Mythic paradigms provide the reader or spectator with a series of familiar reference points and a set of expectations which the novelist, artist, director, playwright, composer or poet can rely upon as an instructive shorthand, while simultaneously twisting, and relocating them in newly creative ways, and in newly resonant contexts.”(81) The resonance of the feelings evoked by the story of the Fall is expressed beautifully by the first two texts, and Alice Walker’s novel offers a complete retelling of the Creation Myth. In all these texts a “looking back” at the way things were occurs before the writing back can be attempted.

The protagonists in these novels experience painful nostalgia for their lost Eden and the innocent state of being close to nature, unconscious of the wily ways of the world. Nostalgia is not just for the grace of their gods but for the bonding with their community members and their own cosmology. Like Adam, discarded from the Garden of Eden, lost and searching for light in a gloomy world of despair, the quest of the protagonists first leads them in a journey to re/cover their lost dignity and sense of self, brings them back, now whole and better integrated to a state of affirmation.

The protagonists in the novels studied assume mythic-heroic stature on account of untold suffering they experience at the hands of the colonizers, enhanced further by their sacrifices to uphold their tradition and loyalty. This is true for Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Lissie’s experiences through several births in *Temple of My Familiar*. Their sacrifices redeem their fallen status and restore life to their people.

Despite converting to Christianity himself, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, not only in response to the common bastardization of his native people, but to show his fellow citizens that the Igbo were dignified. Achebe, however, does not idealize the Igbo people and amply exposes the fractures and injustices within his community. He does this with a great deal of reverence and love for the Igbo and their ways. The Igbo in Umuofia are used to a democratic process of meting out justice and have their own socio-religious order. The men of Umuofia are known for their vigour, courage and war like attributes. Chapter 1 describes the leisurely and idyllic life of the tribe. However, not only age but achievement too was revered. Superstitions had their own place in maintaining social order. Faith holds them together. Old forms of medicine worked. The miraculous and the mundane coexisted. Vicious practices like throwing twin babies in the forest to die were prevalent as they were considered abominations and unnatural. Achebe uses proverbs and tales of animals and birds, not only to depict the order in that ethos but also to illustrate the leisurely pace of the complete lives they led.

The death of Ikemefuna, a boy who is sent to live with Okonkwo as part of the punishment to their enemies, and who becomes dearer than his own son, Nwoye. Ikemefuna's death by Okonkwo's hands signals a bad omen for Umuofia in general and Okonkwo in particular. Okonkwo is exiled from Umuofia for accidentally shooting a boy during a funeral ceremony. He goes to live in Mbanta, his mother's village with his three wives and children. His mother's kinsmen help him cultivate yams and make a life for himself but being away from his own place takes something out of him permanently. After seven years of exile, when he returns to Umuofia, he finds the winds of change have blown and it is too late to set things right. Okonkwo painfully and helplessly watches on as the white man takes over his people, their way of life, religion, government and finally loses his son, Nwoye to the white man's religion. New religious beliefs and systems of justice are thrust upon the people of Umuofia and cracks begin to appear in their way of life. Achebe writes in a understated manner: "There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia." (161) In the clash of cultures, the white man fails to understand the self-containment of the Igbo social order and disrespects their age old practices.

Achebe maintains a neutral stance in his narration, in that, he does not condemn the white man's actions openly, but only gives the sequence of events. It is this quality of understatement that provides eloquence to his account. Okonkwo's distress is fully credible and quite reminiscent of the nostalgia for the past that Adam experiences after being banished from Paradise. It is experienced more as the loss of a state of being than a geographical location. The feeling of being uprooted and alienated is uncannily similar, so much so that, it is undeniably a trope. To quote the most poignant lines in the novel: "Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the war-like men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women." (165)

Okonkwo, in a final warrior like act of defiance kills the messenger sent by the white administrators and commits suicide in his own compound rather than submitting to their justice. It is ironic that Igbo custom does not permit them to give him a decent burial, since suicide is condemned as the worst abomination. Okonkwo's body has to be taken down the tree and buried by the whites. His death assumes tragic significance in the face of the Igbo's fate as a whole, which is to surrender to the economic-military power of the white man. The most obvious sign of the destruction of Igbo culture and its authority is the repression of Igbo voices at the end of the novel. Colonialism

imposes its grammar and henceforth represents the African as a subject with neither a voice nor a logos. The story of the Fall, as part of the creation myth provides the vision with which to understand the colonized subject's distress and state of being before and after the colonial encounter very evidently in the novel discussed.

By allowing the District Commissioner's voice to take hold of the narrative at the end of the novel, Achebe achieves the twin purpose of lending an ironic twist as well as moving the context from the particular to the general. The irony lies in the fact that the tragic story of the mighty warrior Okonkwo is relegated to a paragraph in the commissioner's proposed history book. The story of the Igbo has recurred in the entire African continent wherever the encounter with the white man took place. It assumes the stature of a legend in its broad sweep and becomes part of their racial memory for all times to come.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O describes the ideal function of re-education in these words: "(the colonizer) would like to have a slave who not only accepts that he is a slave, but that he is a slave because he is fated to be nothing else but a slave. Hence he must be grateful to the master for his magnanimity in enslaving him to a higher, nobler civilization". (qtd. in Nesbit, para 3, lines 4-5)

These lines foreground the ideal slave psyche which the colonizer wants to achieve in the colonized subject. This explains the fascination the "still mentally colonized psyche" of even the intellectual and elite classes of newly independent countries, where there is a constant need for the white man's approval.

This perspective applies easily to the protagonist Antoinette's condition in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Briefly, the novel is a retelling of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of Antoinette, renamed Bertha. The novel is a prequel to Brontë's novel and hence, Rhys has to reconstruct Bertha Mason's early life in the Caribbean before being brought by force as it were to England to be locked up in the attic in Rochester's house, Thornfield. Rochester, without being named as such is given a voice in the novel. As Eimer Page puts it, "Rhys divides the speaking voice between Rochester and Antoinette, thus avoiding the suppression of alternative voices which she recognizes in Brontë's text." (para 1 lines 2-3) The trope of an idyllic Eden which is lost to Antoinette after her ill fated marriage to Rochester and the nostalgia for the lost freedom and innocence of a close to nature existence of the past pervades yet another classic postcolonial novel. Antoinette's meeting with Rochester, his marrying her for her wealth, and his growing resentment and patronizing attitude towards her place and people mark the Fall for her.

She desperately seeks to win his love and even resorts to obeah with her servant Christophine's help. Christophine is a strong presence throughout the novel and a reminder of the way things were. There is a literal relocation of the characters in the novel from Coulibri, Jamaica to Granbois, Dominica. ('Granbois' meaning the great forest/woods)

The novel is a classic illustration of writing back to the empire from the colony and foregrounds the often neglected, oppressive condition of the Creoles, who were on the margins of Caribbean society after the Emancipation Act(1833), alienated as they were from the blacks and colonizers alike. There are references to their marginalized existence early on in the novel when Antoinette is shunned by the black girl Tia and called a "white nigger" and as being worse than "black niggers".(8) In spite of the racial slurs faced by Antoinette and her mother Annette, there is a sense of belonging and happiness they feel about the place. This is evident in a single, simple but beautiful line in the first few pages of the novel, describing their house in Coulibri in these words: "Our garden was large and beautiful, the tree of life grew there." Fecundity and life abound in the images of the island. The lines in which she recollects the image of her house are filled with nostalgia, "From a long way off I saw the shadow of our house high up on its stone foundations. There was a smell of ferns and river water and I felt safe again, as if I was one of the righteous."(15) Antoinette is also expressing guilt that arises out of being on the wrong side, socially and economically, at all times as a Creole in Caribbean society. The peace that she feels at home, however marginalized she might be, even as a child are expressed in these lines, soon after her mother wakes her after she has had a nightmare and puts her to bed: "I lay thinking, 'I am safe. There is a corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers.'" (10)

Part II of the novel has Rochester's narrative. It is evident that camouflaged in his initial feelings of excitement mixed with feelings of recoil at the exotic colours, the flora and fauna and the fragrances of the place is his lust for Antoinette and the need to possess her to the point of reducing her to a shell of her previous vivacious persona. The reader can see the consistency in Rochester's treatment of Jane early on in *Jane Eyre* too in this aspect. Even as Rochester gains control of the narrative, Antoinette loses her speaking voice and in a desperate attempt to salvage her marriage, seeks the obeah woman, Christophine. In contrast to the overtly Christian Jane with whom she shares many similarities, Antoinette is cynical about God and religion in general.

Jean Rhys, in an interview has said, "The most seriously wrong thing with part II is that I've made the obeah woman, the nurse too articulate." Christophine is a strong

presence throughout the novel but especially so in Part II. She is clearly, at least in Rochester's view, Satan, who tempts Antoinette to transgress. Christophine, however, can be seen as her only source of strength in her trapped existence with Rochester.

A reference in the novel to the crowing of the cock signifies Judas' betrayal, with the moot question being, "Who is the traitor?" There is further relocation and distancing from home across the sea to the "cold country", England. With her confinement in Thornfield referred to as "The Great House", madness and morbidity in Antoinette, now renamed Bertha, climax in her death wish till finally, she is faced with the choice of destroying herself in Thornfield. The feelings of the protagonist after leaving Eden(Home/Caribbean) serve as a springboard to the novelist to foreground issues of identity and power dynamics between England and the Caribbean as also, sexuality and madness, female isolation and anguish, subjugation and survival. There is a powerful scene of Antoinette who has no mirror in Thornfield and it resonates with Jane looking at herself in the mirror at several points in *Jane Eyre*. The resonance in this case, is to draw the contrast in their situations. Jane is permitted to flower and grow, whereas Bertha is stifled. The following lines speak volumes: "There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her.

But the glass was between us – hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (116) This is the nature of the angst she experiences. There is a clear loss of the sense of self after her Fall.

Rhys leaves the conclusion of the novel open ended with multiple possibilities for the protagonist and in this sense, seems affirmative. It concludes with her about to start the fire: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do." (123) This signifies her freedom and the attainment of selfhood from being "the other" in Brontë's novel. Redemption after the Fall brought about by her encounter with colonial oppression personified by Rochester, perhaps can only come through death?

Rhys masterfully maintains and deepens the gothic elements of the story. While rewriting a much canonized classic, she writes back to the empire. One could read traces of a demythification of sorts of the story of the Fall, in that the protagonist is ready to even embrace death in the face of the loss of her Eden.

Joseph Campbell said in *Open Life*, "The imagery of mythology is symbolic of spiritual powers within us". (Moyers, para 12, lines 1-2) This seems to be Alice Walker's main contention too in her novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*. The novel reads as her treatise

on the history of racism and the dignified and rich cultural heritage of African people. It remains one of the most eloquent and powerful acts of writing back in the history of postcolonial writing till date. The story of the Fall and loss of Eden in the novel recurs like a leitmotif in the stories of various births that Lissie, the main narrator/protagonist tells. Her various accounts of the loss of Eden through her different births, mainly through violent interventions by the white man, become the springboards to re/tell the history of Africa and colonization of the continent. Walker even re/covers the myth of the Black Madonna, who is still worshipped in Poland but originating in Africa as a goddess. Walker's 'womanism' informs the stories woven into each other in intricate patterns, reminiscent of 'quilting' and in the way of oral tradition. Lissie's narratives are interwoven with Zede's a woman of colour from Latin America, who in desperation escapes from the violence and oppression at home to reach San Francisco with her daughter Carlotta.

Lissie's mythical stories encompass a 50,000 year time span, when African tribes lived with their ape cousins and learnt from them to live in harmony with nature. In another birth, Lissie, born as a white man with Husa, the lion as a familiar knows paternal love only from the lion. These bygone eras speak of man with nature in Africa which give way to man over nature with the advent of the white man and his guns.

The novel includes heart rending accounts of the middle passage and sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children with the birth of mulattos and setting foot in the New World in chains. Walker beautifully weaves in slave narratives. Lissie's narratives have healing effects on contemporary Afro-American couples like Suwelo, Fanny, Arveyda (named after Ayurveda) and Carlotta. Love as a healing force is the common thread that holds the stories together.

Walker, in several ways subverts the story of the Fall from Eden beginning with the story of a python who takes care of the tribal children to the mythic story of Ba, an African tribal girl's familiar by inverting the stereotype of the serpent as Satan and foregrounding the divine aspect of snakes in myth. Walker takes a holistic view of life in the universe and speaks as an ecofeminist of the need to live in harmony with nature. She is also not in confrontation with men and sees them as equally in need of healing. She assigns a crucial role to the Erotic and does not compartmentalize sexuality and spirituality and restores both to a place along with the sacred. This is evident in the evolution of the contemporary American couples in the novel and the transformation wrought over them. A new religion heralded in by Shug and Celie (who are living legends in the novel), espouses and blends Walker's close- to- heart theme of womanism.

In this sense, this novel surpasses the others, as it does not stop at nostalgia after the Fall from grace (namely, the event of the colonial encounter), but seeks to set history

right by rewriting it, re/storing and re/affirming the place of people of colour, not just Africans but throughout the world. J.M. Coetzee reads the novel as tracing three stages in human evolution which Lissie lives through. First when humans discover fire, they live in separate male and female tribes with familiars. Second is the age of pygmies, a happy age with visits back and forth with each other and with apes. Third, the time of war waged by Europe against the great goddess of Africa, the instrument of this warfare being slave trade. In Walker's counter myth "Africa is the cradle of true religion and civilization". (para 5 lines 4-5)

Walker is able to accomplish this by examining and overturning the very myths white men have used to claim superiority and colonise, and she embarks on a literary-archaeological expedition as it were, to tell the way it was from the African point of view. The scope of the retelling straddles issues like the corruption, enslavement and fall of matriarchal societies to the goddess myths and Amazonian tribes, stripped of their freedom, subject to erasure of their history and culture.

As is evidenced in the texts studied, the story of the Fall serves as a springboard to narrate stories of the other Fall, signifying the colonial encounter in each case, loss of Paradise as a way of life and ethos, nostalgia for the lost Eden and salvation/restoration of selfhood coming after great sacrifices and even death of the protagonists. Subverting of the myth itself, as it happens overtly in Walker's novel, results in questioning a major paradigm that has dominated Western imagination, that of the Creation myth. Although writers do not overtly use the Fall story, it plays itself out as echoes of its emotions and images resonate in these works. As Northrop Frye says, myths are usually intended to convey special knowledge, what in religion is called revelation. Knowledge of the colonial experience conveyed by the writers studied borders on great revelations. Myths can often become etched permanently in the collective unconscious even cutting across cultural boundaries as archetypes and this appears to be so with the tragic story of the Fall.

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