

**IDEAS AND IDENTITY: A BIT OF DIFFERENCE IN DEFINING THE ‘SELF’ FROM ‘I AM BLACK TO I AM POWERFUL’**

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**Abstract**

*The reality of the physical world is constituted around ideas. We locate these ideas in the context of past and present through memory to fix an identity. Reality keeps on changing with the change in ideas and ideologies over a period of time. Hence, history or past contains multilayered truths of human cultures. Different civilizations have their own cultures which they have preserved by passing it on from generation to generation. An individual defines itself in the context of history of these preserved cultures. Therefore, one traces the ideas from history to represent the changes in languages and cultures. To define a country's present and to forecast its future one has to go back to its past. The fact becomes more evident if we see it in the context of African continent. The continent of Africa's then present was distorted and crumpled by colonialism and the future became uncertain. However, even after de-colonization Africans continued to define their identity with their glorious past. But, by the time this approach of locating themselves in the past has undergone a change. This paper would aim to trace that change of difference in looking at the 'self'.*

*The argument of this paper is built on a Nigerian writer Sefi Atta's novel A Bit of Difference that how an African woman in the white land constitutes its individual identity. Her attitude to define herself as an African is a bit different from that of earlier African Diasporas. This novel attempts to cast a critical lens to evaluate various transformations in African women's identity, sexuality and beauty. The paper probes into African women's attitude of being beautiful and powerful with the color black. The text A Bit of Difference depicts the image of Africa created by west and an image of Africa which native people feel connected to. And, it also ponders upon how Africa's history has been defined by west to constitute the idea of 'dark continent' to legalize the colonialism and to create an urgent need to look at.*

**Key Words:** Culture and Identity, Past and Present, Beauty and Sexuality, Africa.

Human world is constituted around language and its meaning. Everything happens within the language. Things do not carry the meaning within rather the absence and presence

of one object defines the difference and relation with another object. The movement or shifting of objects creates ideas of being similar or different from one another yet complementary to each other. One cannot do away with the other to exist and create its independent identity. Existence of anything depends on the moment the object is seen and taken in an account till the time the thing is not thought or defined it neither does exist in ideas nor in the physical world. As the French philosopher and scientist Rene Descartes says, 'I think therefore, I Exist'. Human mind has the capacity to think and to produce the reality in mind as well as in the world. The most indispensable part of human existence since the ages is defined and thought through the past and history. To locate one's identity one looks back to its roots. And, if the roots have already been cut, the cordless existence cannot last longer the 'destroyed, disfigured, distorted (Fanon, 154) past can leave one in the state of voicelessness. This imperial strategy was practiced over people of Africa by British colonizers. Erasing or replacing language and culture of native people left them in alienation and they lost the belief in their tradition because 'The language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' (Thiong'o, 15) and this experience of self realization were snatched from colonizers. People see their character and relation to the world in the context of history. The idea of 'Otherness' projected by west, set a position of 'Other' to define natives, "they had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other.'" (Hall, 225)

Even after decolonization, one is not liberated from mind and soul. Language culture and history of British is in native practice and they see themselves in comparison to the history of colonization. The community of African diaspora came about as an after effect of European imperialism and conquest of African continent and its people. The Diasporas who trace their roots back to the Continent of Africa are scattered and settled across every country of the world. These African Diasporas facing some difficulties in the survival in the host land. The main issue is of their skin color which differentiates them from the rest of the human race of the world. The issue of superior and inferior race has already been there in world history. But, it was entertained and practiced more by English people over the colonized people. English were influenced by the Greeks and Romans who were considered the ideal model for human beauty and the superior race of humans. To overcome the survival difficulties in host land African Diasporas have to know their similarities and differences. Diasporas from different countries of the continent represent Africa because of their international presence. Their collective consciousness gave birth to the new consciousness of 'self-searching' which unites the stand of the entire Diasporic writings. There is a shift from the misty historical constructions towards the proud and glorious moment of history. The present journey is a celebrated one, a move from the understanding of the 'Black' towards the real significance of 'Black' as a color and as a race. African people have build up a sense of dignity and pride in being black that has come up as the result of contemporary Neo Black movement of Africa.

The black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma to turn white or disappear; but he should be able to take cognizance of a possibility of existence. In still other words, if society makes difficulties for him because of his color, if in his dreams I establish the expression of an unconscious desire to change color. My objective will not be that of dissuading him from it by advising him to 'keep his place'; On the contrary, my objective, Once his motivations have been brought into consciousness, will be to put him in a position to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the source of the conflict that is toward the social structures. (Fanon, 100)

The Nigerian author of *A Bit of Difference* Sefi Atta herself has experienced the state of being in host land. She shares her time between United Kingdom and United States. However, the attachment she has for her homeland and roots pulls her back home every now and then. The novel expresses the acute consciousness of representation of Africa, especially Nigeria in her case. Sefi Atta challenges the preconceived notions of Africa and brings life to contemporary Nigeria. In her works she boldly discusses the controversial issues like religion, Christianity, terrorism and violence and the globally constructed biased ideology of race. She sets an alarm on culture and tradition of Africa which is getting contemplated in the process of migration and assimilation abroad. Being an immigrant she expresses the torment and pain of African Diaspora who are caught between balancing the image of Present Africa and dissolving the stereotyped image of colonized past. Her diasporic characters redefine the meaning of being African and people of color outside the home. Atta probes those collective concerns of identity and belonging that tells the tale of commonly 'shared history' of rich heritage and culture of Africa. The continent had a history that remained untold and unheard and later it got distorted and twisted in the wake of imperial motives. The sense of 'self' of Africans got lost in the strategic distortion and removal of history of the continent by the colonizers. The consciousness of having history could resist the way of colonial assertion of power and superiority over the native culture. Because, when one thinks of history, of country, of self shapes what one is. Therefore, strategically the ideology and mind of natives were made to look down upon their color and mocked their past as to prove them inferior.

The novel *A Bit of Difference* is a shift from the idea of colonized past, color politics to the self empowerment of Nigerian women who is proud to be black and declares her powerful. The novel has the complexities of representation of Africa to the world, the status of African women, the practice of power, the use and misuse of aids and funds. It also deals with the themes like reality and reflections of misrepresentation, tradition and change, etc. It is a story of 39 years old Nigerian girl Deola Bellowho resides in London and works with an NGO to raise to aid poor African countries. It's about her experiences of becoming an individual in the world which constantly defines her identity as a black Nigerian immigrant.

The title 'A Bit of Difference' refers the difference with which she is treated abroad and the frustration with the way she is seen in Nigeria as an unmarried woman. The novel

also reflects the economical and political condition of Africa and Nigeria. She wants to make a difference by working with different charity institutions from all over the world. The novel opens with airport scene, Deola has just landed to America for her professional purpose and on the way to hotel she came across an unusual hording of a black girl who has short afro hair and wearing hoop earrings and a pin stripe suit. And, the caption of the picture is, 'I am Powerful'. Defiantly, she is powerful enough to attract the attention of passerby. Hording of a black girl in America is quite unusual as African women are always been mistreated for their color. But, this picture tells the story for self belief and self acceptance.

It is just social construct that has made people of color to think of themselves as inferior as they have shared the history of colonization. The identity and the language that has been used to create or to define natives changed the reality of colonized. Now, the phase has come up to create their own language which is full of black experience and the reality of outside world towards blacks. Speaking up the language with pride saying 'I am Black and I am Proud' (James Brown) can help in re-locating the 'self' and 'identity' as a powerful and proud black. It would bridge the gap between past and present and would connect back to the roots. Self- acceptance among African people would complete the relational incompleteness with their own glorious past.

There have been many underlying significances of Black and it symbolizes its position in many different ways. Black provides a space of visibility and presence for the other colors and establishes its occurrence. It imparts a new ray of path for the other colors, serving as a strong setting for its presence. The very strong significance of the color 'Black' questions for its own establishment and occurrence, wanting to prove its place all over again for a new consciousness. It is too ironical that black is searching for its own place when it rather gives place to the existence of other colors. There is a deep search for the significance which has been 'within' through the phases of finding out its broader significance.

The color black has always been in association with ugliness and evil and white is with peace and mourn. In words of Johann Wolfgang Goethe 'Colors are lights's suffering and joy'. But, the implication of 'Black and White' colors during and after the phase of colonization referred to define the human identity. Colors act as metaphors and attribute meaning to things not to humans. Scientifically, the appearance and presence of a color depends on light. Wherein, dark skin color among humans has biological determiner called pigment melanin. Light skin color is determined by the bluish white connective tissues and hemoglobin that flows in veins. Dark skinned people are mostly found in the tropical latitude where ultraviolet radiation of sun rays is the most intense and the melanin in their skin acts as a shield against the radiation of ultraviolet rays.

Body color of human beings is completely biological and natural not ethnic and cultural as it has been defined so specially in the case of people from the continent of Africa. Socially attributed meaning of black and white has led to yet another biased and prejudiced social construction of 'Race'. The concept of 'Race' itself is seen in the context of physical

appearance, hair texture and skin color of people of a particular region. Holocaust and genocides had happened in world history unfortunately on the name of superior and inferior race. Africans and Zews have gone through the victimhood of these pathetic episodes. And, history kept on haunting their upcoming generations till the date. The inevitable sorrow of being misrepresented in the history, of becoming rootlessness, of distortion of their identity unites all the people from different generations who share the common feelings and call upon them to fight for their collective identities and ideologies.

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