



(Re)Defining Self in Linus T. Asong's *Stranger in His Homeland*



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contradictions that arise when it comes to the individual relating with society in Linus T. Asong's *Stranger in His Homeland*. The paper holds that the individual is on a constant struggle to define himself from society's constraints. Read basically from the socio-psychological standpoint, the paper argues that the individual in Asong's narrative here studied has conflicting views with society that dictates the pace for belonging. Asong's novel, built on a postcolonial setting presents the individual caught up with different societal and cultural sensibilities which he/she ends up, as the narrative projects, being a victim.

KEYWORDS

society, individual, identity, self-concept, assertion

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The study demonstrates that the individual in *Stranger in his Homeland* is in constant struggle with his/her society, thereby insisting that for “being” to be attained, the individual should strive to attain freedom from societal chains and by this, this study corroborates Sartre’s words, “Being-For-Itself.” Therefore, the focus of this paper is to assess the extent to which the individual in Linus T. Asong’s *Stranger in his Homeland* attempts to be free from his/her society. Guided by this problematic, it is needful to stress that the individual in this narrative is the postcolonial individual who in the words of Bill Aschcroft in *Post-Colonial Transformation* is a colonial victim who is not “entirely autonomous” (35). Kelvin Ngong Toh, describes such an individual as an alien “whose subject-construct is built on shaky and sandy soils” (146) and so, the rootlessness of the colonial victim that is seen in Asong’s narrative is based on his/her (in)ability to define him/herself. In this study, I discuss the concept of self as looking inward and also resisting the external that seems most often to cloud representations and imposition around and about the individual who for the most part assumes the position of the other. Therefore, my idea of redefining is important because based on representation, the individual is defined from birth and his/her struggle to exist and have essence is actually the individual reconsidering his/her space in society.

Theorising and Conceptualising

Social Psychology is a broad discipline that handles human behavioural patterns alongside societal exigencies. This study adopts the notion of the self-concept to analyse the identity issues that plague the colonial victim in Asong’s *Stranger in his Homeland*. Self-concept constitutes part of one’s identity. The affective component of the self-concept entails the positive or negative views the individual holds about him/herself; the positive self-concept would mean all the positive things an individual attributes to him/herself and which also make him or her positive about him/herself. Negative self-concept is the reverse. Positive and negative self-concepts lead to self-esteem, which John W. Santrock defines as “...an individual’s overall view of himself or herself... worth or self-image” (91). Here therefore, self-esteem is an individual’s feelings of self worth, his/her efficacy beliefs and overall wellbeing. It has to do with answering the fundamental question: “who am I?” The answer to this question begins the idea of being; the very notion of one’s existence and the feeling of living as free as possible. It also breeds self confidence and the ability to define one’s self. Jerome B. Dusek in *Adolescent Development and Behaviour* says self-concept “...may be

readily defined as the way(s) in which we view ourselves. In this sense, it contains perspectives of our physical selves, ourselves in various roles...and other dimensions which are important to us. Self-esteem is our evaluation of our self-concept.... Self-esteem, then, represents the affective component of the self-concept” (140-141). Self-concept and self-esteem therefore help in not only shaping one’s identity but also directs one’s pattern in life experiences. This is particularly so since identity has to do with one’s beliefs, values and morals that have been influenced by the self-concept. In this light, Dusek sees identity as a

self-developed, internal and ever-changing organization of one’s attitudes and beliefs. It helps one identify one’s strengths and weaknesses, and one’s uniqueness, as well as similarity to others. Identity provides a sense of continuity of the self over time and a sense of integration of self...it undergoes continual changes as we encounter new and different roles, such as worker, spouse, parent, and retiree. With each new role, we must again explore our identity further and make adjustments dependent upon the new role. (141)

From Dusek’s submission it is evident that identity is not stagnant; it is an evolving concept and attribute, capable of change depending on the individual and the role being played at a particular time and space. One’s identity can either be defined by the individual or by others. Some people define themselves by their own standards so long as they believe that what they think or do is correct, without necessarily depending on society to define them. David G. Myers in *Social Psychology* sees those people who live independent of others as having a “self-contained” identity, also known as personal identity as they possess an *independent self*. About them, he writes.

Uprooted and placed in a foreign land, one’s identity – as a unique individual with particular abilities, traits, values, and dreams – would remain intact. The psychology of Western cultures assumes that your life will be enriched by defining your possible selves and believing in your power of personal control. Don’t conform to others’ expectations. Rather, be true to yourself. Seek your own bliss. Do your own thing. To love others, first love yourself. (43)

As concerns the above individualistic notion of identity, they discard others’ prejudices and appraisals about them and the community’s opinion about them matters less. In the case where one’s identity is defined by others, people live according to the norms that society prescribes. This therefore means that individual views are relegated to the background. These people whose identity is defined more in relation to others, according to Myers, have an *interdependent self*, otherwise referred to as social identity. About them, Myers posits,

Uprooted and cut off from family, colleagues and loyal friends, one would lose the social connections that define who one is...the interdependent self is embedded in, and partly defined by social memberships. Thus the goal of social life is not so much to enhance one's individual self as to harmonize with and support one's communities. Conversation is less direct and more polite. Self esteem correlates closely with 'what others think of me and my group.' (43)

Most societies that practice communalism such as pre-colonial Africa determined identity based on the above model. However, modernism happens to dominate current life styles and in it capitalist thrive has unshakable roots since the collapse of communist states in the last decades of the 20th century. Modernist ideologies, which fueled the flames of colonialism has also gained in- roots in virtually all of Africa. This makes that more and more, even Africans are shifting from communal life styles to strictly modernist individualist patterns. According to Muhammad Yahya Cheema in "Orestes Quest for Self-Identity in Sartre's *The Flies*,"

Sartre's philosophy of Being (i.e. existence) distinguishes between the "Being-For-Itself" and the "Being-For-Others." Whereas the "Being-For-Itself" relates to the "self," "Being-For-Others" denotes the "other" or the milieu in which the former exists. Since existence precedes essence, man is thrown in this world without any predetermined nature that controls him. Identities are constructed then by the individual consciousness ("Being-For-Itself") and consequently, the individual consciousness is responsible for all the choices made. In short, we exist first and determine our essence by means of choice. (116)

From this observation, it is evident that there is no predetermined destiny for anyone as everyone will need to find his or her answers to questions as one travels along the entire life course.

Identity Imposition versus Assertion

In the blurb of Linus T. Asong's *Stranger in His Homeland*, it states that: "[h]onest, enthusiastic, arrogant and self-righteous, Antony Nkoaleck, the first graduate of his tribe means well. But his society, entrenched in corruption sees things differently and therefore judges him according to its own norms." These are character traits of Antony as presented in the blurb of the narrative. It is in the midst of his corrupt society that Antony strives to maintain his "self" against the "other" that society prescribes. In the first place, Antony, as a young man, is introduced to colonial education which, in the discourse of Kelvin Ngong Toh in "The Impasse: Colonial Education on the Colonial Individual, A Reading of Caryl Phillips's *A State of Independence* , only puts him in an impasse. The most remarkable aspect of this

state is that he does not decide the kind of education he wants. Upon the imposition of his uncle, the narrator narrates that “Antony’s personal wishes were ignored and he continued his education in St. Paul’s with regret” (47). Antony surrenders to his uncle’s instruction in spite of him. His uncle’s wishes for his nephew to go to school is based not on the fact that the youth will be educated, it is based on selfish and materialistic individualist goal of profit making that is characteristic of the postcolonial capitalist society. In this case, Antony’s “self” begins to get blurred. However, the fact that he regrets the fact that he gets to St Paul’s and not the seminary he had wanted to enrol in, is a sign that he can assert himself even as a lad in the face of his uncle. The fact of regret also shows that even with societal opinions, the young Antony still believes in himself even though he allows his social self to triumph here. In the development of the social selves, our cultures as well as other people’s judgments of the individual counts. That is why David G. Myers in *Social Psychology* contends that “our self-concept - our sense of who we are - contains not just our personal identity (our sense of our personal attributes) but our social identity” (41). What this means is that the individual operates in two “selves” the one he/she has as innate and the one imposed by society. In this case, and from the discussion above, Antony grudgingly surrenders to his society’s “self” perhaps because he is a child and everything is decided for him. In this case, the society’s “self” represented in the uncle is prescriptive; assuming the “know all” role of what is good for the individual.

Regret makes the individual in the novel to develop a liking for him/herself and also to sympathise with his “Africanness” that is subsumed by westernisation. As discussed earlier, one of the things that blurs Antony’s identity is the fact that he is a colonial victim even based on the education he has. This has a devastating impact on him as a person. But the elderly Antony that we see in the narrative shifts from just internal rebellion of the uncle’s will to some open manifestation that justify his rejection, though not entirely, of the West and embrace of his culture that continues to suffer negation. For instance, despite the colonial legacy evident in the inferiority complex espoused in the ideas of his tribesmen, Antony still believes in his people, their customs, traditions and culture and does his best to preserve those aspects that portray them as a people with a cultural identity. It is for this reason that he tries to speak his vernacular during the welcome party to his people’s disappointment. Even when he speaks English, he uses his local accent which to his people is unacceptable since they believe he has acquired the whiteman’s education and should in essence, talk using a foreign accent to distinguish himself from others who have not done same. He also eats the food that had been discarded by Anuse, Antony’s uncle and one of the propagators of the faulty

assumption of Antony's "might" as a result of his education, as local: "*fufu* and *abe-nchi*" (42). Also, his people are disappointed in his dressing which they think is not "western" enough for he does not put on a suit as they probably would expect. Antony is acting seemingly in line with Chinua Achebe who wrote *Things Fall Apart* to counter the derogatory belief of the whites about Africa. Also, Ali Mazrui in "The Patriot as an Artist" posits that "National assertion is sometimes a response to prior national humiliation" (23). This opinion can as well fit into culture, that is, culture assertion is sometimes a response to prior culture humiliation. African culture has been humiliated by colonialism and therefore needs to be reasserted. Chinua Achebe in "The Novelist as Teacher" submits that:

... African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty and they had poetry and above all, had their dignity. It is this dignity the many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. (3)

Achebe is also of opinion that black culture is not inferior. He says of a black boy in America, who would prefer to call harmattan winter, for fear that, his white mates will laugh at him thus, "I think it is part of my business as a writer, to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that a palm tree is a fit subject for poetry"(3). Achebe therefore, says he writes "to help [his] society regain believe in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement" (3). This is what Achebe and other African writers of his generation set out to do.

In order to distinguish and implant himself in his society, Antony at best can be seen as an alien in the society where he finds himself. Antony values human worth and appreciates genuine human relationships. This is very different from the egocentric modernist way of life that is found in the post colony. While his uncle Anuse projects him as a hero and demi-god to be seen only by few, he rejects this deification and opts to be with the people. Antony tells his uncle that: "I don't think I should be treated like a secret... let them see me anywhere they want. If it does not bother them, it should not bother me" (43). As discussed earlier, there is a shift in Antony's response to his social self. This shift is clear when one pits him and his uncle. As a young man, he obeys his uncle and goes to St Paul's with much regrets. This rebellion or rejection is tacit but in the quote above, the individual is in open contradiction with his social self. The tone of the voice speaking reveals the idea of rebellion which enforces oppositional polarity that governs the mind. The first personal pronoun that governs the quote emphasises the fact that the speaker has an opinion and his opinion is built on the

fact that he exists. His open rejection of the uncle, who has dominated him all this while shows trajectory toward his self-creation. Further in his discussion with Angela, the lady Uncle Anuse has arranged for Antony to get married to, he says,

When people talk of killing, Angela, it does not mean the act of taking a cutlass and knocking off somebody's head. It is a thing of this nature that you are doing. You kill a human being when you are placed in a position to save his/her life and you make a joke of that responsibility and the individual dies. (72)

This frank talk is unlike usual in this society where everyone wants to make money at all cost. Angela's irresponsibility in the hospital, to Antony, is tantamount to killing and it is for this reason that Angela's "callous indifference to the possible fate of a helpless patient cut through Antony's flesh like a blade" (73). The way Angela behaves as a nurse is very much a norm in this society. That is why she even has someone to justify her lack of respect for human life and the fact that she misuses the powers she has because of greed that has invaded the postcolonial society. Eru, Antony's friend, tries to convince him that stealing drugs from the hospital is just the norm as he disagrees with Antony,

And is that what you call a bad thing? ... Is that not what everybody is doing everywhere? ... "But I completely disapprove of it" Antony remonstrated. "I can't fancy myself being so mean as to appreciate or encourage her." "Then you change your planet". Eru told him. "... a goat feeds where it is tied, whether you like it or not. "I'd like to see some of those goats die where they are tied, Antony said with an air of total condemnation." (57)

The dialogue here reveal two kinds of individuals in society. While Eru represents the individual governed by his social self and even dominated by a strong ego as he fails to have any governing ethics, Antony is governed by an individual self and having a strong super ego. From this dialogue, one learns that the post colony is built up of people who are not qualified. In the discussion one also notices that Eru's personality is blurred in his attempt to absorb all that society gives him. Antony's resistance makes him a "rebel" as his leftist position is not accepted and in that case, society too blurs him. In this case, it seems evident that whatever the position of the individual, he/she is in societal chains if we borrow from Jean Paul Sartre. Besides blurring, society constructs Eru to be a buffoon consumed by his large appetite which is characteristic of most colonial victims. In another discussion between the two friends we get this, "If I had those your degrees, my rod will scatter into pieces." "Why?" Antony asked him' ... 'Because of the way I will use it' he said. 'With degrees like that, what girl can you ask to dig and she will refuse? Even a reverend sister" (53). Seeing opportunities and refusing

to use them as Eru believes is bizarre. It surprises Eru to hear that he was with Angela but did not “dig” her even if he is not to marry her. Antony tells Eru “you are abominable” ... ‘she is repulsive’ ... [Eru says]:“then dig and pass. That is the kind we call kick-and-pass.’ ‘That sounds silly to me’ he told Eru (70). Thus, the famous saying that “show me your friend and I will tell you who you are” does not hold true for Eru and Antony’s relationship. He has his ways and believes in them and will not subscribe to immoral behaviour because of peer influence.

In addition, Antony is courageous and believes that situations are to be faced and problems solved and he therefore does not believe in escapist tendencies. He therefore rejects alcoholism which to him only leads to temporary escape. When Eru on enjoying his alcohol discovers that Antony disregards alcohol and he asks ‘what problem do you have with alcohol’ ‘it’s all escapism’ [Antony] said. “Alcoholism, drug addiction and lasciviousness, those are all forms of temporary escape. They solve nothing. Grapple with the problem, look for a means to solve it, don’t run away into a fantasy world by resorting to things of that sort.” (69). In post-colonial African societies especially in Cameroon from which this novel emerges, drinking is the order of the day. For a youth like Antony not to consume alcohol because he wants to remain focused is to truly assert his identity in a community that virtually everyone cherishes the consumption of alcohol.

Antony is also fascinated with the acquisition of knowledge. To him knowledge is life, thus, “[i]n his peculiarly intellectual mind, a man’s library was a reflection of his seriousness towards education which he considered synonymous with life” (65). In books lay knowledge and education which Antony sees as “better than any number of mansions” (67). That is why though with an M.Sc, he still thinks he has much to do or that he is not as qualified as his people claim. So,

Antony talked with very great contempt about his people’s attitude towards the education he had obtained. He pointed out that the M.Sc which he had obtained was, as a matter of fact, not the highest rung in the academic ladder of degrees. There were many more masters degree holders around, many Ph.D holders. It was therefore unfair for people to make a god of him for doing just what everybody else was doing. He would feel ashamed to mention his degree among real intellectuals. (90)

Humility is the true mark of an intellectual and Antony espouses this humility as seen in the above excerpt. He hates to be idealized for he knows that there are still some people who are intellectually greater than he. When the BUUS students call him Dr., he protests but he is made to understand that the equivalence of his degree is a *Doctorat de Troisième cycle*, and

these people are called doctors. He tries to down play his achievements but finally accepts the doctor title. Myers states that “achievements boost self-concept when we see ourselves reflected in others’ appraisals.” (44). Thus, when people think well of us, it helps us think well of ourselves. He keeps on researching and keeps an open eye in society so as to understand it the more.

Linked to Antony’s quest for knowledge is his desire to change society for the better: “his mission was to change things for the better” (48). When he is sent to the North to teach English, a Master’s Degree holder in political science, it is a way of downgrading him, thus raising an attack on his identity, his efficacy beliefs and overall self-worthiness. But he uses this opportunity to assert his identity the more. First of all, he accepts to go to the North, thus accepting himself. In identity studies, self-acceptance is a powerful indicator for self-identity. Thus while in the North, he takes up the duty of teaching the students not only the English he has been assigned to teach but also inculcating in them moral lessons and making the school more environmentally friendly.

In trying to change society for the better, he tries to educate by castigating poor behaviour in his write-ups. He believes he can make things right by using his art. One of his articles he entitles: “The Second Coming” in which he critically analyses the political situation of an African state with its political, economic and moral crises after independence from British rule, and the way forward to make the country a better place to live in. In it, he also pleads that Britain should consider the country as a prodigal son and come back and govern them because they have finally accepted that “white rule is superior, that the black man has no love for anybody but himself!” (116). Antony’s plea in this article echoes the house and rain metaphor in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. where the narrator submit thus:

We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our rulers left, and taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within, they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loud speakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and the next phase – the extension of our house – was even more important and called for new and original tactics; it required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house. (37)

Antony is not actually calling for the British to come back but his plea somehow is a satire on the injustices of African political systems and the malpractices that characterise post-independent African countries and possibly a redirection of the blame from the colonial

masters to the Africans who more often than not, oppress fellow Africans. One of the major functions of literature is to teach and transform society, a function that Antony believes in. But when Antony gives this work to the editor of the National Daily

“The Starlight” he tells Antony ‘This is not a short story... it is a complaint. It is like a rope round your neck. You publish such a thing you will be killed several times,’ he told him, folding the sheets of paper and returning to Antony.

‘This is the very apotheosis of mediocrity’, Antony told him.

The man shrugged.

‘Is it a lie, what is in there?’

Antony asked

‘That is hardly the question’ the man said....

‘*Speak the truth and speak it ever,*’ Antony quoted a familiar verse. ‘

He that hides the wrong thing, he does, does the wrong thing still.’ (117)

The editor, embarrassed at Antony’s audacity tells Antony that a work of that nature can only be published anywhere in Africa only if it is turned into fiction. But Antony, equally embarrassed that the people who should show the way and change society, ‘The Starlight’ as the name of Newspaper suggests fear to tell the truth. But Antony tells him: “what we are going through at the hands of incompetent leadership is not fiction” (117). Antony is very blunt and speaks out his mind despite all odds, a part of his personality. Antony therefore does all he can to maintain his individual self especially in the face of negative colonial underpinnings and against the whims and caprices of society. However, the pressure exerted by the society slowly but surely begins to take its toll on him and this is the focus of the next section.

Social Pressure and the Limits of Self-Assertion

Despite Antony’s disciplined, principled and frank nature, his society because it sees him as an outsider begins to make him lose confidence in himself. For instance, Antony becomes dishonest in an attempt to get a job. After a few “blunders” Eru realizing the negative change in him tells him about the extent to which he had changed and “Antony remained silent. He felt ashamed of himself.... He knew that he was not the same rigidly principled man he was when he first arrived Likume... (144 – 145). He equally begins to tell lies as in the case where he tells Eru that it is his idea that they should have a grand wedding when it is actually Vicky’s. Antony also ironically begins to consume alcohol to be courageous enough to tell Vicky about her “rotten” nature as “... he needed to be very different from his usual self to talk to her about it. He needed to be drunk” (180). He now believes thus in drunken courage.

Antony, with great disappointment, confesses to Eru after his so many problems that “my confidence in my judgments has been shaken to the roots” (186). However, he begins to regain his hope when he is being sent to the North, thinking that he would offer his selfless services. However, his problems with Zache, the malignant and callous College Principal makes life unbearable for him.

In spite of the effort Antony makes, like planting flowers in the school compound to make it beautiful and more eco-friendly, instilling discipline in the students and even digging a well to solve the severe water crisis, buying a ball despite his very meagre resources to encourage the sports discipline, collaborating with some expatriates to furnish the school with useful books, Zache makes him lose confidence in himself, especially for the fact that he is an Anglophone. Zache considers neither Antony’s academic standing nor his efforts which apparently are yielding fruits. As a result of jealousy, he resorts to scheming and painting Antony black in the face of administration, claiming that he is an Anglophone rebel which earns him dismissal from the public service, ironically, for his hard work and commitment. The strife between Zache and Antony as Francophone versus Anglophone respectively is very revealing of the Cameroonian set up where Anglophones believe they are unjustly treated by the Francophone dominated government in the union between the two. Thus, Zache’s continuous othering of Antony confirms Konings and Nyamnjoh’s assertion that “... no matter how educated an Anglophone was, he was never to enjoy his full rights and merits of citizenship, put side by side with his Francophone master” (142). He therefore suffers what has been commonly referred to as the “Anglophone problem,” the permanent feeling that Anglophones are marginalized. As a result of this persistent fault-finding and misrepresentation, “[Antony] appraised the rules, the principles in which he had always clad his actions, those rules which passed conscience and moral sense above everything that man did on this planet. For the first time, he doubted them” (276). When he again realizes that the Minister of National Education punishes him unjustly, and takes drastic measures against him, that is dismissal, without verification

Antony [is] horrified and overwhelmed with disillusionment... It showed how little it cared for honesty and hard work. It showed how exposed to the whims of incompetent authorities those in the lower echelon of the civil service were.

For the first time, the word FAILURE entered into the vocabulary of his personal life. (286).

This state of affairs is aggravated by his suspension from the civil service for no just cause and he is so traumatized and “it now looked like the whole world will consider him guilty”

(323). All of the above incidents show that because of society's negative influence, Antony gradually begins to see himself as an outsider in society; his self-esteem gradually slides down the slope and his psychological state is greatly affected as he becomes insane. Finally, he is not able to contribute to the development of society or change it as he wanted to and he realises that society has affected his identity, altering it to suit their own vicious motives. His self-efficacy is therefore killed. Stephen Mennell says "each person's self is formed by a reflexive process, in which our perception of how others see us plays a paramount part...individual self – images and group we – images are not separate things" (1). Similarly, Rebecca Kay avers that identities

...range from the intimately personal and unique to the broadly collective and binding. Identities are a way of making sense of who we are and as such may be the result of a very individual process of reflection and choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. However, identities are also socially constructed and determined by the wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. (1)

If society continuously sees that he is bad, then, he thinks there may be something wrong and he therefore begins to feel bad and lose confidence in himself.

Conclusion

Antony sees himself to be going against a general current. He suffers psychological exile and loneliness because of his difference. About this type of exile, Raymond Williams (qtd Nnandozie Inyama) posits

He knows himself to be different, and the pressure of his activity is to preserve this difference, to maintain the individuality which is the term of his separateness. There is great tension in this condition, for theoretically, at least, the self-exile wants society to change, so that he can start belonging to it... (qtd in Inyama 44).

The imposition of identities on Antony obliges him to seek to assert his individual identity in his society where social identity seems to outweigh individual identity. The various conflicts testify that Antony does not want to live by the standards of his society because he believes that though the practices of society seem to be the norm, the people do not engage in doing the right things and passing right judgment. It therefore, takes him a lot of moral strength to go against the practices of a society that sees him as a misfit and assert his viewpoints and identity. Also, despite the fact that the societal pressure takes its toll on him, it is evident that the world created in Asong's novel can only move forward if it follows Antony's ideological standpoints and principles. Though he experiences psychological trauma, the crisis and turn of events in Linus Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* which is a sequel to *Stranger in His Homeland*

testifies to the wrong direction the society has taken, a society that has killed its “hope” symbolized by Antony. Thus, seemingly, the only way to return to a sane society is for it to rethink and change its outlook on life.

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