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Bell-Gam's Ije Odumodu Jere and Decolonization of Literature: A Postcolonialism Paradigm

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Abstract

The jaundiced representation of Africa by Western writers has received critical scholarly attention in the past by African writers who have tried to decolonize African literature to present the African reality. Although most Igbo novelists writing in the Igbo medium have endeavored to reflect the Igbo reality in their novels, no attention had been paid to deconstruct the opinion of Western writers that painted a picture of a dark Africa in need of enlightenment. It is against this backdrop that the present study examines the issue of colonialism; this is with a view to delineating the trajectory of colonialism and the benefactors/recipients of civilization. Leopold Bell-Gam's novel Ije Odumodu Jere was purposively selected as a result of its thematic concern with the subject matter. Edward Said's Post-colonialism Theory was used as guide in the study. The result of the textual analysis reveals that, Africans of the Igbo stock was involved in colonizing some white entities, not necessarily Europe. The protagonist, Odumodu took a voyage by sea from Eko (Present day Lagos) to an island named Finda and later Mimba whose inhabitants were white, or at least not black. In Finda, Odumodu stopped the culture of cannibalism, revolutionized their agrarian system, changed their barbaric laws and introduced a legal system that prioritized fair hearing and justice in Finda. In Mimba, Odumodu introduced the formal education system and built schools including teacher training institutes where courses such as Geography, biology, the eco-system, marine science, archeology, and religion were taught. Leopold Bell-Gam, a white writer deconstructs the Western concept of colonialism by positing that blacks were also engaged in colonizing uncivilized people implying two facts; first, in the past, whites were as uncivilized as blacks, and second, the trajectory of colonialism is not White to Black, but also Black to White. This study maintains that colonialism was a bidirectional interaction involving mutual exchange of ideas and interests between giving and receiving groups, and not a unidirectional engagement as Western literature and history tends to portray.

Keywords: Igbo, Ije Odumodu Jere, Post-colonialism, Finda, Mimba

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Introduction

Colonialism is a concept that depicts Western interaction with their subjects in developing nations or the third world. Going by historical accounts, Europe colonized countries in Africa, Asia and America spearheaded by the English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. Their objective was purely political and economic; to govern or administer African entities and in the process explore and exploit their economic potentials. Great Britain emerged as the largest colonizer and imperial power, quickly gaining control of more territories than other colonial powers in Europe. All areas or nations under its control were known as the British Empire. After British Empire, France became the next largest colonial power. Throughout this long history, the West became the colonizers, and many African and Asian countries and their peoples became the colonized. As a result of the overwhelming political influence and dominance of the colonial masters, it was assumed that Western Europeans and, in particular, the British people were biologically superior to any other race. In other words, all races other than white were inferior or subhuman. Such beliefs directly affected the ways in which the colonizers treated the colonized. These sub-humans or “savages” quickly became the inferior and equally “evil” in need of salvation which can only come from the White imperialists. Often the colonizers justified their cruel treatment of the colonized by invoking European religious beliefs. From the perspective of many white Westerners, the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Asia were “heathens,” or savages possessing

pagan ways that must be Christianized. Thus, the colonizing mission of Europe was predicated on the assumption that Africa was a dark continent.

Incidentally, Africans and other colonized entities lived within the bounds and ambit of their cultural systems consisting of their social, economic, legal and governmental structures. Incidentally, the colonizers reasoned that African cultures were antiquated, obsolete, inhuman and therefore anathema. One of the customs practiced by some African societies, including the Igbo, Yoruba and other ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria which was found obnoxious by the colonial masters was the killing of twins. Others include the worship of multiple gods and ancestors, the killing of innocent people to mark the burial of a king, etc. By sheer use of force, the colonial masters denounced and relegated African cultures and propagated their own. It is noteworthy that it is not all African customs that were barbaric or inhuman; most African customs were based on justice, truth and humaneness. For instance, Igbo world view or philosophy exemplifies the primacy of fairness, honesty, openness in all human relations. The principle of *ofonaogu* is based on truth and uprightness in inter-personal relations. In addition, it is not all African cultures that operated a governmental system that was deemed dictatorial and anti-people. For example, long before colonialism, the Igbo operated a republican system of government where an assembly of elders, called *umunna*, rather than a titular king deliberated and adjudicated on matters in the land.

Literature, being a mirror of society, the perception of the colonialists about their colonial subjects have been reflected in the literature written by the West. In such writings, Africans and their cultures were misrepresented all for reasons of justifying colonialism and the forceful exploitation of the resources of Africans. They were portrayed as people without a world view or ideology and ways of organizing themselves. They were presented as a lost or blind people in need of light and guidance. They were depicted as people without capacity to rule themselves and therefore in need of being governed by the West. It is against this sordid, unpalatable background that Africans began to write to debunk the impression of the West about Africa and Africans. In most of these writings by Africans, African cultures were promoted along with their social, economic and political systems. Thus, post-colonial literature by African writers was a reaction, and to a great degree, a resistance of the uncouth and negative coloration of Africans by Western writers. It is based on the foregoing that this study aims at examining the deconstruction of colonialism by Bell-Gam¹ with a view to delineating the trajectory of colonialism, the principal actors and the purpose of such a 'redeeming' mission. Some of the questions posed in the study are: Was it only Europeans that embarked on civilizing endeavours? If blacks were involved in civilizing missions, what was their purpose? Where black

Africans really in need of redemption by Western colonial powers?

Postcolonial Literature

Not much has been written about decolonization of literature; as a result, this review will mainly reference researches in postcolonialism as it is not only the precursor but shares similar concerns. The postcolonial literature originates in former colonies such as Africa, Asia and the Americas. It is reflection of changes in social, cultural. Economic and political practices in newly free regions and it rebels against anything that reminds them about former colonial masters. Mukherjee provides a holistic description of Postcolonialism as "not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the collapse of empires². It is ideologically an emancipatory concept particularly for the students of literature outside western world". Hoque³ presents a historical account of the labels used in designating the literature of the erstwhile colonized countries as stemming from Third World Literature, Commonwealth Literature, and presently it is in more refined term known as Postcolonial Literature or Postcolonial Studies or postcolonialism. According to him, the literature of this epoch is an apt reflection of changes in social, cultural, economic and political experiences in newly free countries in Africa, Asia and Americas whose major feature is a resistance against the ideological positions of the former colonial masters.

¹ Bell-Gam, 1963

² Mukherjee (1996: 3)

³ Hoque, (2022)

According to Al-Saidi⁴, postcolonial literature deals with the reading and writing of literatures written in previously or currently colonized countries. Whether from the perspective of the colonizer or the colonized, post-colonization is about people and their personal experiences: the sense of disempowerment and dislocation. According to Ayobami⁵ post-colonial novels are written to present the "unequal relations of power based on binary opposition: "Us" and "them", "First World" and "third world", "White" and "black", "Colonizer" and "colonized". In corroboration Hoque⁶ states that postcolonial writing questions the dominant culture, challenges the concept of established authority and is concerned with the political and cultural freedom of formerly subjugated people in the colonial era. It is primarily concerned with the conflicts between suppressor and suppressed, mainstream and marginalized, ruler and subjects and glorifies the suppressed 'other'. In the view of Al-Saidi⁷ the 'other', the colonizer believes, should be owned, altered and ravished - he is deceptive and fertile. This postcolonial model is predicated on the tension between colonizer and colonized, and dominating and dominated, thus pointing to the importance of binary oppositions in post-colonial literature. This implies that postcolonial writers protest against western ways of categorization. Their attempt at exposing binaries often expresses itself in the rewriting of canonical stories that are at the basis of inequality. The result of this

rewriting is that it sometimes reverses a binary opposition, so that what used to be the bad half becomes the good one.

Literary Decolonization

While decolonization may be the process by which legally dependent territories obtained their constitutional independence and entered the world stage of international relations as sovereign states or conceiving decolonization as the reversal of the process of European imperial expansion with all its political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic consequences (Bismarck⁸), literary decolonization presents an equivalence of its political counterpart. It is theoretically, the divesting of post-colonial literature by Africans of the influences of the West or erstwhile colonial masters. In the view of Mendoza⁹ decolonization is not "a metaphor for antiracist, anti-capitalist critiques, nor for critiques of Eurocentrism" but "is always an unfinished project". The implication of this position with respect to literature is that, it is not a linguistic symbol or representation for the critique of the social construct of race nor of capitalism; it is not merely a critique in and of itself; rather, it remains an ongoing adventure, meaning it is something you constantly do, something you actively partake in (Johansson¹⁰). Mignolo¹¹ describes as "a delinking from the two major Western macro-narratives". The notion of delinking by Migolo is that the decolonial option opens up a way of thinking that departs from the

⁴Al-Saidi (2014)

⁵Ayobami (2006: 108)

⁶Hoque (2022)

⁷Al-Saidi (2014)]

⁸Bismarck, (2012)

⁹Mendoza (2016: 103, 113)

¹⁰Johansson, (2018)

¹¹Mignolo (2011: 273)

accounts of contemporary epistemes and new paradigms; thus, delinking in literary studies would mean to re-evaluate new ideas and approaches and their respective records coupled with the literature that represents these literary periods. This is needful because these records are based in the European tradition and universalized because of European cultural hegemony through colonial domination (Johansson,¹²). Therefore, delinking is a decolonial option that can be used to open up for additional and simultaneous kinds of thought that are not defined by modernity, or the European experience of history (Thiong'o¹³).

This divesting or delinking represents a desperate attempt made by African writers not just to debunk the jaundiced portrayal of Africa and Africans by the Europeans but a way of presenting an accurate account of African culture and history. In undertaking this onerous task, they try to infuse nuanced African cultural elements in their works, with respect to customs, and folklore inclusive of proverbs, tales, songs, anecdotes, myths and legends. Thus Jeyifo¹⁴ produced instances of these efforts by notable African literary icons such as Kofi Awoonor, Amos Tutuola, Mazizi Kunene, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. The Ghanaian writer Awoonor draws copiously from funeral dirges, folk songs and rituals from the Ewe ethnic group through which he achieved harmonious rhythms which could not have been possible in English. Tutuola's narratives and

characters are sourced from the Yoruba metaphysical world where there is a blend or mixture of the seen and unseen which endows his writings an evocative and mystifying feature. Drawing from ancient Zulu poetic and chants, Kunene reenacts epic poetry in English by presenting traditional legends. In Soyinka's plays such as *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*, traditional Yoruba rites and rituals are used to depict contradictions of the period, and the muse, the inspiration is no other than Ogun, the feared Yoruba god of destruction. Achebe presents the Igbo cosmos in such a realistic form that the African relives the traditional life shorn of the vestiges of civilization and in spite of an alien culture that had besieged Igbo land. Through his characters, and particularly their dialogue laced in proverbs, idioms and anecdotes, the stories reflect the feelings and heartbeat of the culture which resonates with other African cultures.

However, these concerted efforts made by African writers to make their writings look and feel African has not really extricated them from the vestiges and influences of Europe. One of the reasons for this state is the issue of language, and culture. Ur-Rehman¹⁵ captures this dilemma by stating that the transition from 'Commonwealth Literature' to 'post-colonial literatures' has also failed to remove all the inherent contradictions of the earlier label, because so far the dominant post-colonial texts and their critiques are in

¹²Johansson, (2018).

¹³Thiong'o (1986).]

¹⁴Jeyifo (1992)

¹⁵Ur-Rehman (1998)

European languages. Although the desire of post-colonial African writers is to relive the accurate African reality, they still utilized the same weapon of subjugation used by the colonial masters, which is language, the English or French, as the case may be. A prominent introspection of the need to decolonize in an African context is seen in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's¹⁶, where he asserts that the "biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance ['liberty from theft'] is the cultural bomb". He expatiated that "the cultural bomb" effectively "[annihilated] a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves". The cultural bomb was not only aimed at destroying the indigenous culture but replacing them with the imposition of the English language at an institutional level. Consequently, English became the carrier of culture and history within that specific location, and nothing could measure against it. By "decolonising the mind", Thiong'o advocates for reconnection with the millions of revolutionary voices in Africa and the world over demanding freedom from the clutches and manacles of the West (Johansson¹⁷). This cultural annihilation was echoed by Abayomi¹⁸ when he avers that Western colonialism is not satisfied with pillaging human and material resources to sustain and consolidate its power over its colonies; it also destroyed the indigenous

cultures and their values such as language, dressing, beliefs, etc and supplanted them with distorted versions. Thus, by altering or deforming the history and culture of Africa, the West created a new set of values for the African.

It is for the purpose of actually decolonizing African literature that Ngugi wa Thiong'o gave up writing in English and started writing in his native Gikuyu. After publishing his maiden novel *Weep not child* (1964) in English, followed by *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) Ngugi stopped writing in English, and began to write in Gi'ku'yu' and Swahili, which led to the publication of the first Gi'ku'yu' novel, *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi considers his writing in Gikuyu as a part of the anti imperialist struggle of Kenyan and African people, and a means through which African literature could be freed from the literary culture of Europe. In decolonizing the mind, Ngugi calls for a literature in African native languages because these are the only languages which can reflect the rhythms of African life and the struggles of the people, and restore the harmony between a child and his heritage culture. However, despite the position of Ngugi in writing in his native Gikuyu, he still had to translate his works to English because literary critics cannot afford to learn Gikuyu (Ur-Rehman¹⁹). This study holds that this language issue is a major dilemma of decolonizing African literature. It is not possible to decolonize African

¹⁶Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986),]

¹⁷(Johansson, 2018)

¹⁸Abayomi (2005)

¹⁹Ur-Rehman, 1998)

literature without using African languages to capture African realities. Foreign languages, such as English or French can only do so much, but they cannot adequately reflect or transmit African culture. However, as pointed out by Mendoza²⁰ that decolonization is an ongoing concern, Bismarck²¹ emphasizes that, to argue that decolonization will only be complete once this western imprint has been entirely removed is to stretch the definition of the term to such a degree that it loses its analytical function. In his view, this is because there can never be such a thing as a clean slate when it comes to either political or literary decolonization, in that history can only evolve but cannot be reversed.

Theoretical Approach

Postcolonial theory is a literary theory or paradigm that deals with literature produced in countries that were previously, or presently, colonies of other countries. It may also include literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that uses colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. The theory of postcolonialism is credited to Edward Said²² as being the founding work. The book was very influential in the spreading of political, and cultural awareness regarding the cultural implications of European imperialism. The approaches associated with postcolonial theory arise from Said's sense of the totalising power of Western discourses (Patke²³). Ideally, the proponents of the theory examine the means by which writers

from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers, who had presented them in ways that are derogatory and therefore unacceptable. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonizer as superior and the colonized as inferior.

The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance. According to Al-Saidi²⁴, Frantz Fanon developed the notion of the Other which eventually proved influential in postcolonial theory. Fanon explained that the Other is different from the Self, or that the Other is the "not me" rather, he is the Other. In the colonial context, (political and cultural) the segmentation between Self and Other is used to maintain control and authority over the Other, who is seen as inferior. In other words, the colonizer sees 'himSelf' as superior and conversely sees the Other (Africans) as inferior and therefore different from the Self; as a result he has to maintain contrastive identity with the Other to effect control over it. The Other lacks purity, identity, propriety, and is seen as the foreign, the one who belongs to a different group other than the colonizer, speaks a different language other than the colonizer's, and has a different custom other than the colonizer's. Al-Saidi²⁵ posits that the concept of Self and Other is best understood within the framework of binary opposition used to

²⁰Mendoza (2016)

²¹Bismarck (2012)

²²Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978)]

²³Patke, 2014)

²⁴Al-Saidi (2014),

²⁵Al-Saidi (2014)

understand how meanings are shaped, created or reinforced in a text. Binary opposition represents the principle of contrast between two mutually exclusive terms; it avers that the perceived binary discrepancy between civilized groups on the one hand and savage groups on the other hand has perpetuated and legitimized Western power structures favoring Europe as "civilized" white men.

Hoque²⁶ presents two primary attributes or traits of post-colonial literature; hybridity and mimicry. He posits that hybridity is the evolution of new transcultural forms that arise from cross-cultural exchange. The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as oppressive. Hybridity is also a useful concept for helping to break the false sense that colonized cultures- or colonizing cultures for that matter – are monolithic, or unchanging. Hybridity can be social, political, linguistic, religious etc.; It is not necessarily a peaceful mixture for it can be contentious and disruptive in its experience. The centre point of postcolonialism is the mixing of cultures and identities on a global or community scale. Mimicry is another dominant issue of postcolonialism which is used to explain the way by which colonized people adapt to the culture of the colonizers in terms of language, clothing, education, etc, but always in the process changing it in important ways.

²⁶Hoque (2022)]

²⁷Nwadike (1984)

²⁸Nwadike (1984)

Previous Works on the Novel

Nwadike²⁷ chronicled the history of Igbo written literature and categorized them into four epochs, beginning from the Derivative Period (1857 – 1932) marked by translations of literary texts from foreign literatures and religious texts. This period was immediately followed by the Formative Period (1933 – 1966), which is actually the evolution of Igbo written literature which started with the *Omenuko*, a novel in the mould of realism, and followed by fantasies such as *Ala Bingo*, *Osondu*, *Eleliana Ihe O mere*, and *Ije Odumodu Jere*. He described them as fantasies because they could not adequately delineate realistic human characters nor portray the social problems of the Igbo society. This period was followed by the Vacuum Period (1967-1972) and the Glorious Period (1973 to Now). Thus, Nwadike's²⁸ reference to *Ije Odumodu Jere* was anecdotal with respect to its period in the annals of Igbo written literature. Onyekiaonwu²⁹ corroborated Nwadike's impression of novels such as *Ije Odumodu Jere* by asserting that the novel is part realistic and autobiographical and part romantic, which tells the story of adventures and civilizing mission of Odumodu, the protagonist of the novel.

Similarly, Olusegun's³⁰ study of selected works of Chinua Achebe made sketchy reference to the beginning of Igbo written literature by highlighting the role played by F.C. Ogbalu whose many contributions to

²⁹Onyekiaonwu (1986)

³⁰Olusegun's (2018)

Igbo written literature included his own writings and his Varsity Press which helped in the publication of Igbo literature, including Bell-Gam's *Ije Odumodu Jere*, and D. N. Achara's *Ala Bingo* in 1963, as well as *Elelianaihe Omere* in 1964. As pointed out by Olusegun, these Igbo novelists were influenced by Igbo folklore, hence their utilization of the repertoire of Igbo oral heritage in form of proverbs, riddles, and other unique cultural nuances of the language.

Nkoli³¹ undertook a comparative evaluation of the two early Igbo novels, *Omenuko* and *Ije Odumodu Jere*, with regards to the protagonists, *Omenuko* and *Odumodu*. The study revealed that, both novels had the same thematic thrust which is the dilemma of migrants in a strange land. The study found that *Omenuko*'s stay in *Mgborogwu* was marked with huge success and prosperity. He became the successor to the throne of *Mgborogwu*, according to the king's will before he died. Similarly, *Odumodu* contributed a great deal to the people of *Finda* and *Mimba*. He was appointed the Secretary of the state in *Finda*. Through his position, he remodelled their legal system, introduced formal school system and made other reforms including abolishing cannibalism. For *Omenuko*, he was very successful and prosperous in the land of *Mgborogwu*. He was the successor of the throne of *Mgborogwu*. until the chiefs and elders of the land became envious of his political and economic prosperity and protested against his continued leadership and stay in

Mgborogwu. In the same way, *Odumodu* married the king's daughter and became the successor of the king's throne on the death of the king of the land., until the son of the king returned and became envious of his status. While in *Mimba* he lost his wife and three children and when he discovered, as *Omenuko* did in *IkpaOyi*, that he has lost everything, he was left with no other choice than to go back to his home, *Ahaba*.

The review of literature on *Ije Odumodu Jere* shows that earlier writers focused on sketchy remarks or comparative exegesis without any detailed account of the narrative as it pertains to decolonizing post-colonial literature, which in the position of this study is the main thrust of the novel. This is the gap the present study intends to fill.

Methodology

Quite a lot of literary works have been undertaken in the Igbo medium spanning the genres of the novel, drama and poetry. Out of the indeterminable number of novels in Igbo, one novel, *Ije Odumodu Jere* written by Leopold Bell-Gam, but transliterated by L.A Amadi, was purposively selected for analysis. The reason for the choice of this novel is its thematic concern; the novel is sorely concerned with enlightenment or civilization of a people by another group. The reason for the use of this novel alone is that there is no other work of fiction in the Igbo medium that addresses the experience of enlightenment. The descriptive method was adopted for analyses, and precisely, the binary segmentation of 'Self' and 'Other'

³¹Nkoli (2018)??]

postulated in post-colonial theory formed the pattern of analyses.

Synopsis of the Novel

Ije Odumodu Jere was the only work written by Leopold Bell-Gam, published in 1963 by Longman Nigeria Ltd. *Ije Odumodu Jere* is about the adventures and civilizing mission of Odumodu, the protagonist of the novel. From his native Ahaba (present day Asaba) he travelled to Eko (present day Lagos) in the search for better living conditions. He got a job as a fire poker in a foreign vessel and later as a cook. In the eventual course of travelling to an island known as St Helena, they experienced a shipwreck. The ship was destroyed, and all the passengers were thrown into the water, until, by an act of providence, Odumodu found himself at the coast of the sea. Alone in the island, Odumodu was exposed to all sorts of dangers as he searches for something to eat, where to sleep, and something to wear. The quest to discover the extent of the jungle where he lived led him to the land of Finda. In Finda, after initial suspicions and misunderstandings, Odumodu is received and given a place of honour in the politics of Finda. He acquires the language skills of Finda in both speaking and writing and eventually is made the personal secretary to the king, and eventually marries the daughter of the king who gave him three sons. He and his children who had acquired education in Finda helped in no small way in reforming Finda's agrarian, religious and legal systems. As a result of issues in succession rites, Odumodu is forced to flee Finda to Mimba, a neighbouring town, where he undertook

similar social and cultural reforms by building schools and churches. Due to the accidental death of his wife and three sons in Mimba, Odumodu is forced to escape from Mimba and return his home town, Ahaba.

Data, Analyses and Discussion

In this section, the data will be presented, analyzed, and discussed. The data will be presented based on the stages in the development of the novel, as follows: first encounter with the Other, portrayal of the Self, second encounter with the Other, and mutuality of Self and Other. The data is presented, analysed and discussed below:

First Encounter with the Other

The journey undertaken by Odumodu in a ship named "Elu uwa" to St. Helena was an outcome of his employment as a cook in the vessel. Although he had planned to leave his village, Ahaba to Eko, but while in Eko, he did not plan to travel in a ship to St. Helena, until he secured a job as a cook in the ship. Bell-Gam described the ship thus:

N'out afọ ahụ ka m
bara n'out ugbo ndị
Bekee a na-akpọ "Elu
uwa". O bu ugbo
buru ibu nke ukwu.
Nga a na-afu oku
n'ime ya di ato. Otutu
ebe a na-egwu egwu
di icheiche dikwa
n'ime ya. Otutu
ndikom na ndinyom
di n'ime ugbo a.
Ufodu ha gaje "St.

Helena” n’imata
obodo ahụ, ma
ufọdụkwa gaje ka
ikuku oma nke di
n’ala ahụ kusa ha.
Nkwa ndi Bekee na
opi na ubo na une ha
dicha n’ugbo a.

It was in that year that
I entered an European
ship named “Elu
uwa”. It was a large
ship. There are three
fire places in the ship.
There were many
playgrounds in the
ship. There were
many men and
women in the ship.
Some of them were
going to “St. Helena”
on sightseeing, while
some were going for
holiday. European
musical instruments
such as flute, guitar
and piano were in the
ship (p.4)

The European ship represented here is a symbol of civilization. It implies that, at the point of writing this story, there were contacts and interaction between Europe and Africa. Given the portrayal of Eko as a big city, it is obvious that this is a post-colonial Nigeria. The point that stands out here is the impression of the Other, represented by the European vessel. The writer is suggesting that the Other, the European is advanced in

technology but not that the Self is backward. Having previously worked in a ship as a firekeeper, it means that the ship was not a mystery to Africans such as Odumodu. The European ship was magnificent and far too sophisticated given all the accessories within it. However, Bell-Gam did not present the European ship as an object of wonder and amazement. Rather, it was depicted as just an European vessel used for long distance journeys. The fact that Odumodu worked in it implies, even though to a little extent, that European civilization is not monolithic; Africans or the colonized were needed by Europe to facilitate their operations, implying that the Other (Africans) were useful and not irrelevant as presented by Western writers. Furthermore, the ship wreck that followed in the course of the journey to St. Helena is a subtle question mark on European technology and civilization. In contrast to this ship Bell-Gam provides a description of the local boat used by Odumodu to navigate to Eko

N’oge ahụ motor
adighi, ugbo anwuru
okukwa adighi otutu
n’osimiri obodo anyi
otu ha di ugbua. Onye
choro iga Eko n’oge
ahụ na-ahusi anya nke
ukwu. Mgbe ufodu o
ga-anọ ihe dika out
onwa na uma n’elu
miri. O bu ugbo osisi
ka m jri gaa Eko

At that time there were
no vehicles, there

were no trains also as
they are in our country
today. Those
travelling to Eko at
that time used to suffer
a lot. Sometimes they
would spend
something like a
month and a fraction
of days on the water. It
was a wooden boat
that I used to travel to
Eko. (p.1)

The point being made by Bell-Gam here is the distinction made between the Self represented by the wooden boat, and the Other represented by the European ship; irrespective of the shortcomings of the wooden boat, with respect to time and insecurity, it was able to take them to Eko. In contrast, the sophisticated European ship could not take its passengers to their destination – St Helena; it could not stand the storm that eventually drove the ship to its destruction. The shipwreck is akin to a mockery of Caucasian civilization and a paradox of their avowed Self conceit. It is a negation of their claim to superiority over the colonized entities, seen as inferior. The fact that, while the storm lasted, all the passengers in the ship (white and black) were at the mercy of the elements, showed that the polarities of Self and Other, or superior and inferior is just a human construct. Evidently, in the course of the storm, the passengers did not depend on the captain of the ship (who is obviously a white man), as shown in the following excerpt

Obi gbafuru mmadu
nile di n'ugbo a,
onyeisi anyi
amaghikwa ihe o ga-
eme. O si n'elu rida
n'ala, sikwa n'ala
rigoro elu. Ndinyom
na umuntakiri di
n'ugbo amalite bewe
akwa n'ihhi na ha
amarala si na o bu
onwu na-abia. Onyeisi
anyi n'ugbo kwuru
otutu okwu n'imesi
anyi obi ike. Anyi
buru abu kpeekwara
Chineke, na-ari o ya ka
o gbaghara anyi
mmehie anyi, ma
zoputa mkpuruobi
madu nile ndi di
n'ugbo ahụ

All the people in the ship were anxious, our captain did not know what to do. He was running up and down. Women and children in the ship staryed crying because they knew that death was imminent. Our captain said a lot to encourage us. We sang songs and prayed to God to forgive us our sins and save the souls of all in the ship. (p.5)

It is evident in this excerpt that the passengers in the ship did not repose any confidence in the captain of the ship who is a white man. If the white captain was indeed superior and more intelligent, or if the passengers saw him in that light, they would have approached him to find solution to the storm. Rather, the captain was as anxious and confused as the rest of the passengers; although he tried to encourage them with some words, the people were disconsolate and rather than pay heed to the words of the captain, they called on God to rescue them from impending death. The position of Bell-Gam in this context is that Africans did not believe in the superiority of the white man over them, implying that, Africans did not see themselves as inferior to the white man or superior to him. Rather, they believed that all people, irrespective of race were the same under a superior God. This explains why the passengers ignored the white captain and beckoned on God in Heaven to save them from death.

Portrayal of the Self

In this narrative, Bell-Gam presented the Self as strong, inventive and resourceful, a being that is capable of surviving with or without the Other. After the shipwreck, Odumodu found himself on the shores of a certain jungle. Alone, he was challenged with three things: food, shelter and clothing. In the search for food, he was able to find *ukwa* “breadfruit” in the jungle, and through his initiative, he made fire through some objects with which he roasted the breadfruit. Thereafter, he started fishing; through his creativity, he made a fish net with which he started fishing and as a result overcame the

challenge of food. In the case of shelter and security from wild animals, Odumodu used his creative spirit to construct a make-shift mud house in the jungle. In spite of the fact that he did not have sufficient resources to undertake the building project, he was driven by sheer will and the need for security to undertake the task. He used only a mere kitchen knife to cut down wood from the jungle which he used as beams, mold clay soil and cut down palm fronds which he used as roof for the house. In the end, he was able to complete the building as the author narrated.

Ozugbo oge m jiri
ruchaa ụlọ ahụ bu
onwa abuo na mkpuru
ubochi iri na abuo.
Oru ụlọ rara ahụ
tumadi mgbe o bu nani
out onye na-arụ ya.
Ogugu ukpa nkwa nke
di n'ala a ka m jiri mee
ibo na okpukpu. Mgbe
ulo a kochara, m biri
n'ime ya.

The time I spent in completing that house is two months and twelve days. Building a house is difficult especially when it is one person that is handling it. The stems of palm branches in this land is what I used to fabricate doors and windows. When this

house was dry, I lived
in it. (Pp.9 – 10)

Bereft of any material resources, it is evident that Odumodu deployed his creative mind in the building project and used only materials found in the environment. After completing the house and securing himself, he confronted the challenge of clothing. Having learnt cloth weaving from childhood from his mother, he planned to weave his clothes but for the fact that the raw material *ogho* was not available. However, after a thorough search in the jungle, he was able to find the raw material *ogho*. Thereafter, he fabricated a frame *nkwe* for weaving, and used the only knife at his disposal to produce the weaving loom *otiti*. In this way, Odumodu was able to weave clothes that he used to cover himself from the effects of cold in the jungle. The implication of finding solution to these three challenges is the capacity of the African, who had been painted as savage, to create and invent. The ability to harness resources in one's environment and channel them towards sustaining life and security can only be cultivated and accomplished by highly intelligent individuals who understand the link between man and his environment. It is obvious that Odumodu did not set out to hunt for animals to kill and satiate his taste for food, like savages; rather he was searching for plant foods, in the form of fruits and vegetables, thus delineating his human spirit. The fact that he built a house and not try to live atop the trees in the jungle for security is a demonstration of his high status as human. Plus the fact that he actually weaved his own clothes instead of using leaves or other things in the jungle to cover his nakedness. Thus, the

idea of the Self presented by Bell-Gam is an Igbo African who can survive on his own without the white man or the Other. Understandably, the efforts made by Odumodu in the jungle, in respect to feeding, shelter and clothing were just initial steps toward transforming a jungle to become a human habitat. That these achievements were recorded by a sole individual with little or no resources indexes the limitless possibilities achievable by the African, and counters the negative portrayal of Africans by Western writers. In sum, Bell-Gam is suggesting that Africans are capable of not only taking care of themselves, but can also take care of other people, as the next section would prove.

Second Encounter with the Other

Through an act of curiosity, Odumodu found himself in the land of Finda, a certain geographical area that is not African and not Europe, but whose people were white. After he was captured by the people of Finda, Odumodu describes his captors thus

Anughị m ihe ọ bụla
ndị kpụ m na-
ekwu...Ọ tụtụ onye
nwe ala n'anya nke
ukwu n'ihụ madụ dī
ogologo ka m, ma nke
ka nke, n'ihụ na m na-
ejị nji...Dị ka m
kwuru na mbụ, ndị
obodo a ahụbeghi
onye ojii mbụ. Nke a
mere ha nile ji
gbaputachaa na-eleta
m.

I did not understand
anything my captors
were saying...It was
surprising to the king
of the land to see a tall
person like me, but
especially to see that I
am black...Like I said
earlier, people of this
land have never seen a
black person...This is
why all of them ran
out to look at me.
(Pp.15 – 16)

Bell-Gam used two physical features to provide a glimpse to the type of people who captured Odumodu. First, compared to Odumodu, they were short or smallish in size, and secondly, they were not black in colour, meaning that, even if they were not white as Europeans, they were white in some way. The description of the Finda seems to suggest that, they are Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese or such people who, on the average do not possess huge physical frame and are not black, and cannot be referred to as white. However, the depiction of the Finda as smallish is not done on a derogatory stance; Bell-Gam provided a realistic picture of the people without any suggestion that they are evil or uncivil due to their size or way of life. Rather, Bell-Gam presented their society in positive light as seen in the following excerpt

Obodo a mara mma
uzo iri kari
Eko...Ulo m bi n'ime
ya mara mma di ka ulo

onye nwe ala
Bekee...M nwere
ugbo ala inyinya an
na-akpu. Ma ihe a dum
emeghi ka m ghara
icheta, mgbe o bu
la, ihe banyere ala m nke
m ahubeghi anya
mgbe tere anya.

This land is over ten
times more beautiful
than Eko...The house
in which I live is as
beautiful as the house
of the Queen of
England...I have a
coach driven by four
horses. But all these
did not prevent me
from remembering, all
the time, my country
which I have not seen
for a long time. (Pp.23
– 25)

Bell-Gam's description of Finda leaves us in no doubt that it is a developed city. The first proof is that, it is over ten times more beautiful than Eko; at the time, Eko is the most prestigious city in Nigeria, if not in Black Africa, being the seat of the colonial administration before independence of Nigeria. The suggestion that it is more than ten times beautiful than Eko shows the rate of its development. The second proof is Odumodu's personal house which is compared to the house of the Queen of England in grandeur. These may be hyperbolic accounts particularly since

Odumodu had never been to England, but it is an emphasis on the high status of Finda as a society. It is for this reason that commentators such as Nwadike³² posited that the novel is a fantasy. The position of this study is that, Finda may be a fictional country or society, but it is a realistic description of a certain place and people in probably Asia or thereabout who had attained an appreciable and considerable degree of development in post-colonial times. However, the status of Finda did not blind him to his position as a non-native; he continued to have nostalgic feelings about Nigeria his country and his native Ahaba. In this designation, the usual contradiction between the Self and the Other is voided by Bell-Gam. Rather, there is a melting of the wall separating the Self and the Other. The Other is appreciated and enamoured as well as the Self, implying a symmetry in perceptual designation. This symmetry is concretized in the mutual contributions or exchanges made by the Self and Other in the welfare and social development of Finda

Mutuality of Self and Other

Bell-Gam notes that Odumodu was instrumental to the social and cultural development of Finda, just as Finda was instrumental to the improvement of Odumodu as a person. In the narrative, Odumodu was shown to receive a lot of favours from the king of Finda, particularly in the area of education, as the following excerpt shows

N'ihì na anụghì m
okwu ala ahụ, onye
nwe ala enye m out
onye nkuzi ọ na-akwụ
ụgwọ n'ọnwà n'ọnwà
sị ka ọ kuziere m okwu
obodo ahụ...Mgbe m
na-anọọla out afọ
n'obodo ahụ m
nwerela ike ikwu
okwu ha, mụtakwa ide
akwụkwọ n'asụsụ
obodo ahụ. Mgbe m
na-anọọla afọ atọ
n'ebe ahụ m matala
akwụkwọ nke ukwu
nke mere onye nwe ala
jiri mee m onye ode
akwụkwọ ya...

Because I did not
understand their
language, the king
gave me a teacher he
paid every month to
teach me their
language...After one
year, I was able to
speak their language
and also write in their
language. After three
years, I had attained so
much education which
made the their king to
make me his personal
secretary...(Pg 18)

³²Nwadike (1984)

It is notable that Odumodu was not presented as educated at the onset of the narrative. Rather he was presented as an artisan who went to Eko to learn a craft, and eventually became a worker in the English ship and later a cook, which led to his fate in the ship. However, in Finda, through the magnanimity of the King of Finda, Odumodu attained a high level of education to the point that he became the personal secretary to the king, which is a well-respected position, which put him in pole position to marry the daughter of the king of Finda. In addition, Odumodu's children were educated in Finda where they specialized in different areas including agriculture, religion and law. In this way, Finda was pivotal in the personal improvement of Odumodu, implying that he benefited from his interaction and association with the strange people. Thus, the image of the Self presented by Bell-Gam is not that of a self-sufficient Self or a subservient Self but a realistic Self with a need for enhancement and improvement. In turn, Finda also benefited from Odumodu, as the following excerpt shows

Mgbe ọkpara m ụ́tara
n'ụ́lọ́akwụ́kwọ́ site
n'ìhè ha ziri ya n'èbè
ahụ́, ya abụ́rụ́ onye
ọ́rụ́bì a maara aha
ya...O ziri ha ụ́zọ́
ọ́hụ́rụ́ e si elì ìhè. Ọ́ bụ́
ya ziri ha na ala na-
achọ́ nri dika
mmadu...N'afọ́ ahụ́
site n'ìhè o ziri ha, ha
enweta nri karị́a otu ha
na-enwe na mbụ́

When my first son graduated from school through what he was taught there, he became a reknowned agriculturist...He taught them new way of planting crops. He was the one that taught them that the land requires food just like human beings...In that year through what he taught them, they had more harvest than before(Pg 27).

Out of the three sons, Odumodu's first son revolutionized agriculture in Finda by evolving new ways of planting. The implication is that, despite their advancement, up till that period, they were not technologically advanced in agriculture. This is to say that advancement is not holistic; there are still room for improvement which Odumodu's first son facilitated by his agrarian innovation which reflected in their yield that same year. Aside the first son, Bell-Gam also noted the contribution of the second son in the development of Finda. Having studied religion, he launched an advocacy against cannibalism as a custom on the basis of God's law and won the battle which culminated in a decree made by the king prohibiting cannibalism in Finda. Furthermore, the third son was a specialist in legal matters and brought his wealth of knowledge to bear in the legal institution in Finda. He succeeded in reforming the penal system in Finda by replacing the erstwhile

death penalty with imprisonment for such crimes as stealing, adultery, and treason, except in the case of murder. He further instituted the court system whereby convicts or suspected criminals would have lawyers to defend them and give them fair hearing, against the former system where the king was the supreme judge. Thus, he democratized the judicial system of Finda. It was on account of the immense contributions of Odumodu in the development of Finda that the king made him an heir to the throne, instead of his own son. Eventually, when Odumodu had to leave Finda for Mimba, for reasons of successor to the throne, he initiated same reforms in Mimba, particularly the building of schools which prioritized such subjects as geography, the eco-system, and religion.

It may seem paradoxical that an advanced society such as Finda and Mimba lagged behind in such areas as agriculture, religion, legal system and education; the fact is that, there is no complete society with respect to advancement, seeing that nature is in a constant state of flux. For reasons of dynamism, there is always need for improvement or innovation in one area of life or another. Irrespective of the high status of any society, white or black, it has an area of deficiency that needs the expertise of the other to put in order. Conversely, irrespective of the low status of any society, black or white, it has areas of strength from which the other can benefit. Based on the principle of complementarity, there is need for nations to mutually exchange ideas for the benefit of all. The point of this analysis is that Bell-Gam presented Finda as a developed city but not a

monolithic entity, as Europeans presented themselves in comparison to Africa. A black Odumodu benefited from a 'white' Finda through enlightenment provided by education; equally, a 'white' Finda and Mimba benefited from a black Odumodu through enlightenment obtained from reforms in their education, agrarian, religious and legal systems. Thus, the Self and Other are portrayed as non-monolithic but requiring changes and realignments in their structures for the purpose of evolving a better society. Much unlike the attitude of Western writers, Bell-Gam presented an unbiased and unjaundiced perception of the Self and the Other, and in this way achieved a realistic presentation of civilizing efforts with respect to the Self and the Other.

In effect, it is not only white Europe or the Caucasian race that were engaged in civilizing missions across the world, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Americas; the black man was also engaged in such civilizing efforts. The difference is that, whereas Europe's mission was purely political and economic, ensconced in colonialism, the black race, represented by Odumodu was not inclined to acquiring colonies but was only driven by humaneness and concern for personal and societal enlightenment and benefit of the Other. This is in consonance with the Igbo maxim *o biara be onye abiagbula ya, mgbe o ga-ala ka mkpumkpu ghara ipu ya n'azu* "A guest should not oppress the host so that when he is leaving, he will not have a hunch back". The implication of this saying is the essence of hybridity and mutual exchange in the interaction between host and guest in the

social space. The Igbo believe that, if a guest oppresses his host, just like the Europe did to Africa through economic and cultural disruption, the oppressor will suffer untold repercussions. A poignant outcome of this analysis is the issue of hybridity as espoused by postcolonial theory. The fact of mutual influence between Odumodu and Finda/Mimba is a demonstration of interdependence and admixture of cultures. The two parties melted the divisive Self and Other and were able to effect mutual exchanges that resulted in benefits for both. According to Hoque³³ hybridity is an important concept in post-colonial theory, referring to the integration or, mingling of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures. The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, followed by the interchange of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as oppressive. Undoubtedly, Odumodu assimilated into the culture of Finda through marriage and other customs and in that way adapted to their cultural practices. It was a dynamic experience as both parties continued to evolve socially and culturally as the narrative progressed, and equally positive given the benefits that accrued to both groups.

Conclusion

In *Ije Odumodu Jere*, Bell-Gam decolonized post-colonial literature in two important ways. First, he did not follow the route of erstwhile African writers who used the English medium to write back to the West.

Rather he toed the path of Ngugi WaTiong'o who postulated that, to truly decolonize, African writers should write in their native languages. By undertaking this narrative in Igbo, Bell-Gam captured the experience in his own unique way without following the dictates of Western writers. Secondly, and more importantly, Bell-Gam wrote back to the West by boldly suggesting that Europe were not the only people involved in global enlightenment; Africans also played a part in world enlightenment. However, in doing so, Bell-Gam negated the idea of a monolithic society as advanced by Western scholars and posited that the African made considerable contributions to the social evolution of a foreign country and also benefited from the experience, implying that there is no monolithic entity. The novel is also a way of telling Europe that, irrespective of the low status of a people, or rather, irrespective of their biased perception of the black race, they (Africans) have something significant to offer to a conceited first world that is under the illusion of self-sufficiency.

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