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Hybrid Identities and Power Dynamics in Postcolonial Umuofia: A Close Reading of *The Voter*

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's short story *The Voter* examines the idea of compromised agency in postcolonial Nigeria through the character of Rufus Okeke (Roof). Through the lens of Homi Bhabha's ideas of mimicry and hybridity, this paper reads Roof's dilemma while also revealing the limitations of Bhabha. Bhabha's concept of hybrid and the third space are sites of possible negotiation and resistance. Meanwhile Roof's engagement with a corrupt political system illustrates a cruel world of psychological tension, economic need, and moral compromise. His choices may not be acts of liberation themselves; rather, they are strategies for survival within a structure that continues to reflect colonial relations of power. This study juxtaposes Bhabha's theory with Frantz Fanon's and Achille Mbembe's materialist critiques. This demonstrates how Achebe advocates for a postcolonial reading that takes the lived realities of complicity and survival more seriously. Moreover, the paper argues for a more grounded view of how identity is negotiated under the shadow of colonial rule.

INTRODUCTION

Many newly independent African states have faced many challenges due to colonialism. Robinson (2019) and Wu (2024) claim that many states used imported governance systems such as the Westminster parliamentary model, which did not fit local realities. These systems often clashed with existing ethnic divisions, traditional leadership structures, and desires for self-determined postcolonial identity. Many African countries encounter ballot confusion and disenfranchisement as well as ongoing political instability (Beardsworth et al., 2022; Nzally, 2024; Ricart-Huguet, 2021). Tensions are not only experiences through political institutions but also become an African literary trope as well. Through literature, the colonial experience was analyzed, imagined, and critiqued in the contemporary period. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong`o, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, and Buchi Emecheta wrote fiction, drama, or poetry that focused on the dislocations of colonialism, the hybrid realities of post-independence life, and the individuals' psychological and political negotiations between tradition and modernity (Ismail, 2023; Nkansah & Bonsu, 2024; Tandon, 2018).

Although Ngũgĩ and Emecheta's build from an overt resistance to collapse (Dube, 2020; Vashisht, 2024), the work done by Chinua Achebe, particularly *The Voter* (1972/2012, collected in *Girls at War and Other Stories*), is more local and nuanced in its resistance. Through the character Roof, Achebe effectively illustrates the

struggle between communal loyalty and political corruption. He makes a strong argument for revealing how hybrid identities are forged not in great crises but in the everyday choices that uncover the more profound constructions of a postcolonial society.

Achebe critiqued the meeting point between colonial authority and indigenous leadership in some of his fictional and non-fictional works. He has shown in his writings how colonial rule continues to shape political rule and personal identity. Achebe's critique is a reflection of Nigeria in the post-independence period (Nnolim, 2011; Orock, 2022; Praseeba & Royappa, 2024). He expresses his political concern not only in his narratives but also in his work as a public intellectual, where he shows concern for the postcolonial state. Achebe's disappointment in the results of freedom, including bribery and corruption, election rigging, and governance failures, runs through the works (Nnolim, 2011; Orock, 2022). The issues highlighted in *The Voter* (1972/2012) are caricatured in post-independent Nigeria, with political instability (Fagbadebo, 2021) and corruption (Abu & Staniewski, 2019; Ijewereme, 2015). These issues are furthered by the inheritance of colonial administrative systems (Yusuf, 2018).

At the time, Nigeria was still coming to terms with the challenges that accompanied her independence in 1960, and the infant nation was already struggling to harmonize its traditional mores with imported systems of governance (Olaiya, 2016; Olu-Owolabi et al., 2024). Here, Roof negotiates two worlds: that of a villager in Umuofia and that of a political agent involved in the nascent electoral process. The doubled persona of Roof represents the broader opposing tensions within the Nigerian state in which colonial influences, such as that of the Westminster parliamentary model, are set against indigenous systems of rule and more traditional leadership models (Hinds, 2008; Ojo, 2023). This tension was compounded by the political instability of the period, which was characterized by election manipulation and overall corruption, which were pressing issues in Nigeria during the early decades of independence (Ijewereme, 2015; Obi, 2011). Through Roof's character, Achebe points out how such complex socio-political dynamics continue to shape postcolonial political engagement and identity.

Roof is not merely a political middleman; he also embodies the doubt and contradiction that shape postcolonial subjectivity. An analysis of Roof's shifting loyalties and fragmented sense of self reveals that a straightforward moral reading is insufficient to capture the story's political complexities. Homi K. Bhabha's work is particularly suited for this task. Bhabha's (1994) theories of mimicry, hybridity, and the third space provide a critical vocabulary for analyzing the precarious, in-between position that Roof occupies; a position where power and culture are in constant, unresolved contestation.

An analysis of Chinua Achebe's short story *The Voter* (1972/2012) suggests a firm pushback against the more optimistic implications of Bhabha's (1994) hybridity and mimicry theories. While these concepts are useful for framing postcolonial identity, the narrative presents a more cynical reality. In the character of Roof, hybridity appears not as a form of subversive agency but as a tactic for survival. Achebe's story demonstrates that under the weight of material pressures and corruption, the negotiation of postcolonial identity is less a space for creative resistance and more a process defined by the moral compromises and psychological costs of complicity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In *The Voter* (1972/2012), Chinua Achebe provides a portrayal of postcolonial Nigeria, which fits into a wider literary project about the contradictions of decolonization, identity, and political life. According to Chang (2021), Achebe's work accurately reflects the African experience. It employs fiction to unsettle colonial

narratives and assert African agency. His writing exists somewhere between history and literature. This relationship adds complexity to postcolonialism (Choudhury, 2025; Gikandi, 2019).

Achebe scholars have engaged in heated debates on language and cultural hybridity. For instance, some analyses highlight how Achebe manages to "Africanize" English or use it to create a counter-discourse, giving African perspectives primacy (Chang, 2021; Dutta, 2010; Kammampoal, 2022). Changing the colonizer's language is an ideological choice based on Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity. Many scholars have used Bhabha's framework to show how the characters of Achebe operate in the third space of cultural negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized (Gikandi, 2019; Ilyas, 2020). The framework also applies to *The Voter* (1972/2012), in which Roof's bilingualism and split allegiances echo the fractured (postcolonial) nature of identity. Achebe's heroes are often shown as uneasily caught between traditional values and education brought by the colonialists, which create a sort of ambivalence and not a stable self (Pal, 2018). This scholarship argues that the hybridity in Achebe's work does not provide easy responses. Instead, it creates a space of non-identity that makes Roof's morally ambiguous actions visible.

The consideration of gender in relation to Achebe's works offers another layer of complexity to the moral quandary. Achebe's male characters do not escape the conditioning of masculine ideals of strength and authority. Achebe's fiction seems to grapple with the validity of these ideas when, in postcolonial life, traditionally masculine attributes lead to moral compromise (Orock, 2022; Umezurike, 2021). *The Voter* (1972/2012) does not openly discuss gender. However, Roof's character is described as a powerful and celebrated figure, which aligns with the expectations of men in his culture. These competing political and cultural forces that, for roof, become the site of his conflict. For this reason, in postcolonialism, moral compromise becomes a critical locus of examination for the structures of masculinity.

This situation of moral compromise puts people such as Roof in a constant tough negotiation marked by complicity or resistance. Achebe stages out the tension in negotiating between the idea of the community and the conscience of the individual using literary devices such as symbolism and shift in points-of-view (Essuman, 2021; Gwekwerere, 2020; Mwinlaaru, 2014). This is common for those who pursue postcolonial studies. The colonized members of new social worlds often stratify between looking to participate and opposing the very social institutions of the world members they wish to join (Drake et al., 2022; Engel & Hummrich, 2023; Rahman & Kazmi, 2024; Williany, 2019). The Roof's changing of sides, waffling, and attempts to please both sides illustrate this reality and position *The Voter* (1972/2012) as an apparent case study in the ethical negotiation around postcolonial citizenship.

Finally, this analysis of power and control is consistent with the scholarship that examines Achebe's political critique. Achebe's fiction is often read as a form of literary anthropology that exposes the mechanisms of corruption within the postcolonial political class (Fawole, 2018; Orock, 2022). While several of Achebe's novels focus on powerful individuals, *The Voter* (1972/2012) analyzes a figure lower on the social ladder. Roof is a go-between between the village's old ways and the new political structures. His in-between status complicates the notion that power is merely oppressor and oppressed. Rather, it illustrates how power can be internalized and disseminated throughout all levels of society.

This paper tries to disrupt this body of scholarship and intervene by applying the postcolonial theory of Bhabha (1994) to understand the specific tensions of identity and power in The Voter (1972/2012). Bhabha (1994) emphasizes hybridity as a potential site for subversion (1991, 1994), while Achebe's realistic representation of Roof suggests the limitations of hybridity in postcolonial life subjected to systemic corruption and material pressure. To fully understand these ambivalences, it is necessary to deeply engage with Bhabha's specific

postcolonial ideas. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha draws upon various thinkers, such as Fanon (1952/1952/2008) and Said (1978), to rethink the legacy of colonialism as a discursive and cultural process. Such processes shape the consciousness, language, and behaviour of formerly colonised peoples. His intervention allows for a meaningful interpretation of *The Voter* (1972/2012), which explores the ambiguities of postcolonial transformation in everyday life.

Bhabha (1994) describes the third space as the ambiguous "in-between" zone where cultural meanings are negotiated as opposed to inherited. This zone, which some scholars also call a contact zone or a transcultural space, is not where culture settles harmoniously, but rather where they engage with, clash, and redefine one another (Ashcroft, 2009). As Kalua (2009) points out, the third space is fundamental to Bhabha's endeavor to theorize identity as a construct which is permanent, discontinuous, and thus highly unstable, and which comes about through contradictions rather than through any form of synthesis. This reciprocal interaction brings forth newly formed, hybrid cultures which are in direct opposition to any forms of essentialist definitions (Kalua, 2009). When applied to Achebe's *The Voter* (1972/2012), the third space sheds light on Roof's function as a mediator who traverses the worlds of traditional authority and democratic institutions. His behavior is formed in the negotiation space, not by singular devotion, but by competing forces that articulate his hybrid position.

Bhabha's (1994) second key conception is hybridity. Initially pertaining to biological processes, Bhabha (1994) repositions it to account for cultural productions that stem from colonial encounters. For Bhabha (1994), hybridity operates as a destabilizing force, wherein predominant colonial narratives begin to unfold and become unraveled by the very discourse that they seek to oppress. He describes it as being, "a problematic of colonial representation… [That] makes a breach within the system, opening it to repressed, subjugated knowledges, and, to some extent, estranges the basis of [colonial] authority" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114). Many scholars have noted that hybridity destabilizes the ruler-ruled binary (Albrecht & Moe, 2015; Richmond, 2015). Roof illustrates this in *The Voter* (1972/2012), in which the protagonist's active hybrid identity of community membership and political campaigning illustrates the reordering of identity through colonial structures.

Lastly, Bhabha's (1994) theory of mimicry elaborates on the dynamics of power relations that underlie acts of imitation. Mimicry, for Bhabha (1994), is the colonized subject's act of imitation of the colonizer as "almost the same, but not quite" (p. 89). While it is an act of colonial subjugation, it is covertly an act of defiance; by reproducing colonial domination with a difference, mimicry reveals its superficiality. In Achebe's (1972/2012) description, Roof performs the political ceremonies of Western democracy: campaign speeches, vote-swamping, bribery, and all, with astonishing bluster. To Achebe, this is not an example of servitude, but an elucidation of the system's vulnerabilities.

Although Bhabha's (1994) framework is important for this analysis, most scholarship ignores the considerable ethical compromises made by figures such as Roof. This study attempts to address this gap by placing Achebe's fiction in critical conversation with theorists such as Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Spivak. It analyzes how systemic rot and economic coercion drive people to opt for cynical collaboration over resistance, thereby stretching Bhabha's ideas' theoretical boundaries.

METHOD

This paper provides a close reading to Chinua Achebe's *The Voter* (1972/2012) while examining the terms of mimicry and hybridity, as well as what Bhabha (1994) identifies as the third space addressed in postcolonial theory. These theoretical tools are used to analyze how the text offers a construction of hybrid identity and

explores the political and cultural tensions associated with postcolonial Nigeria. Close reading suggests an analysis of the text's language, narrative structure, and development of character with a focus on moments of ambiguous meaning, moments that hold symbolic tension. As part of the close reading analysis of mimicry, this paper also identified moments where characters, particularly Roof, mirrored political practice introduced during colonization while simultaneously demonstrating acts of subversion. This close reading also treated moments of mimicry as a space of ambivalence that both satirically affirm and challenges experiences of power.

This analysis investigates the concept of hybridity as a state of conflict between value systems that compete against each other, and considers how Roof's position as a political agent and a village insider demonstrates a disrupted identity. Analytic interpretations are framed as sites of postcolonial negotiation at points in the text where these identities coincide or collapse. The notion of a third space shapes the reading and narratives of political sociopolitical movements in the text, particularly within the context of elections. Thus, the analysis critiques whether the text imagines the elections as replicating colonial power or as a space for the colonized subjects' agency. The next section discusses through textual analysis how Achebe embeds these tensions of theory into the everyday lived experience in postcolonial Umuofia, demonstrating how *The Voter* (1972/2012) performatively enacts and reimagines identity where culture and power intersect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chinua Achebe's *The Voter* (1972/2012) mocks political corruption in a newly independent African state. It also reflects the continuation of post-independence colonial power dynamics. The regional story is set in Nigeria in 1965, five years after independence. Nigeria is technically independent but still controlled by the colonials. Political campaign and manipulation of voters mean that the colonial operations are reconstructed in the postcolonial period. Achebe examines the mixed legacy of colonialism in the postcolonial period. Bhabha's (1994) ideas on mimicry, hybridity and the third space offer a lens through which to gauge the transformation of colonial legacies in an independent state. This reading does not impose Bhabha's theory as an abstraction but uses it strategically to explain the political complex Achebe exhibits.

Mimicry: A Flawed Inheritance

An analysis of *The Voter* (1972/2012) requires a close examination of how mimicry works in the text. It is not just an event, but a way of looking at the postcolonial experience. According to Bhabha's (1994) theory, mimicry is a strategy of resistance by which the colonized subject makes an imitation of the colonizer "almost the same, but not quite," and therefore, destabilizes colonial authority. *The Voter* (1972/2012) raises questions of whether mimicry is always a form of resistance to power, or whether it functions to reinforce power under the disguise of a democratic process.

Achebe's use of language is a powerful starting point. *The Voter* (1972/2012) may be in English, but it is peppered with localized Igbo rhythms and expressions. Many localized word choices provide a window into Achebe's translated Igbo proverbs, such as a good man is one who is not like "mortar which as soon as food comes its way turns its back on the ground" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 13). In addition, vivid metaphors such as the elders who have "climbed the Iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need" (p. 14) are used to explain the acceptance of bribes. The presence of Pidgin English, such as "Das all" (p. 16) and "Abi na pickin im de born?" (p. 17), further demonstrates the complex linguistic landscape.

This linguistic playfulness is most striking in the phonetic distortion of "Congrats" as "Corngrass!" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 16) – a cheerful mistake repeated by "hundreds of admirers" (p. 16). This playful error does

double duty, as it speaks about how colonial language shapes and distorts local speech, and ridicules the empty rituals of the election day. This over-the-top enthusiasm, which is constantly being repeated, shows the somewhat unreal and even ridiculous side of the democratic process at play. Achebe does not simply ape English or pretend that a democratic tradition exists, but he seeks to subvert their authority from within. However, a contradiction lies in the act itself of his destabilization of authority.

The character of Roof first acts as the critique's prime vehicle. As a campaign organizer for Marcus Ibe, Roof was "in the service" of the Minister and had become "a real expert in election campaigning at all levels" (Achebe, 1972/2012, 12). Roof is an example of a peasantry taking on the move and strategies of Western politics: going round embodying the electorate by visiting groups like the elders in the house of Ogbuefi Ezenwa, gauging the mood and temper of the electorate at any point in time, offering benefits like dishing out shilling from Marcus Ibe, and engaging in "whispering campaign[s]" at night (p. 13). He uses these methods, but none of them really adhere to democratic principles. He does not imitate the sort of deep confusion or opposition that Bhabha (1994) describes, but rather out of a will to live and thrive. He understands how to get "firewood" from this position just as the elders do from their votes (p. 14).

Roof mimics the system not to undermine it, but to exploit it for his own advantage, as seen in his calculation upon being offered a five-pound bribe ("weigh the proposition") and his focus on the materialistic ("mesmerized by the picture of the cocoa farmer") (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 15). He acts secretly and pragmatically, assessing that a single vote for the opponent will not harm Marcus' "certain victory" (p. 15). When he takes a bribe of "five pounds" from the other side and swears an oath on the feared *iyi* from Mbanta to vote for the opposing candidate, his subsequent act of tearing his ballot "in two along the crease and put one half in each box" (even confirming his vote for Maduka verbally) (p. 17) does not unsettle or confuse the political system. Instead, it shows how an individual in a postcolonial country can be caught up in a system where imitating power is not revolutionary but merely a means to fit in and live.

This marks a significant tension with Bhabha's (1994) theories. Bhabha (1994) frames mimicry as an ironic and disruptive force, where the colonized imitates the colonizer not out of submission but in a way that subtly exposes the instability of colonial authority that can unsettle colonial dominance from within. However, Achebe's *The Voter* (1972/2012) prompts a reconsideration of this theory in the context of lived political reality. Instead of demonstrating mimicry as a location of irony or subversion, Achebe draws a far bleaker portrait. Roof does not imitate colonial institutions to topple them; he appropriates them in order to survive within a corrupt postcolonial order. His actions, such as accepting a bribe, voting twice, and playing both sides, do not disrupt the power structure; they enable it to function. The electoral process, political patronage, and the passive acceptance of the village are all representative of colonial forms, adapted to suit new elites. In Achebe's (1972/2012) story, mimicry is not a space of resistance, but a tool of accommodation.

To fully grasp this divergence, Fanon's (1961/2004) sharper critique of postcolonial elites is instructive. Fanon (1961/2004) warns that the national bourgeoisie often perpetuates colonial modes of control under the appearance of independence. Although Roof may not be a formal elite, his actions embody the dangers Fanon identifies. Roof is not just a passive participant in a flawed system; he is, in fact, its enabler, deploying his expertise to maintain the status quo. As a "real expert in election campaigning" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 12), his skill is used for manipulation, not democratic engagement. His command to a crowd of illiterate women to vote for the "motor-car" and belittle the opposition party's symbol as of "those whose heads are not correct" (p. 16) is a clear instance of exploiting vulnerability.

Fanon's (1961/2004) caution about the absorption and repetition of colonial values is echoed in Roof's performance of power. The bribery ritual, in which he distributes shillings to the elders "like a priest

distributing the host" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 14), transforms a reward into a show of power. Achebe emphasizes the theatrical nature of Roof's actions, from his "transparently faked" (p. 14) defiance with the elders to the "surface exertion" on election day that conceals his "deep worry" (p. 17).

As a result, Roof's actions do not align with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the subversive mimic. He mimics in order to live and make money, not to challenge authority. His imitation has been drained out and transformed into a strategy for maintaining system stability; it lacks both an ironic edge and a revolutionary bite. He exits the booth "as jauntily as he had gone in" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 17), slipping back into his hollow performance. Tearing his ballot in secret is not an act of rebellion, but rather self-preservation. Fanon's (1961/2004) framework helps to understand Roof as the product of a political system where appearances have taken the place of substance. His complicity goes beyond his personal decisions; it indicates a structural state in which colonial patterns, the same hierarchies now cloaked in national colors, are repeated as a result of postcolonial independence.

Hybridity: Beyond Imitation

Having examined mimicry as a form of postcolonial performance, the analysis now turns to hybridity. While mimicry in *The Voter* (1972/2012) reinforces colonial structures through repetition and adaptation, hybridity offers a more ambiguous space. For Bhabha (1994), hybridity is not so much a mixture of cultures; it creates what he calls a third space, a space where colonial power is both consumed and reversed simultaneously. Achebe's (1972/2012) story, however, challenges the emancipatory potential of this concept. The story presents a more complex image, showing that while hybridity might allow for some level of cultural negotiation, it also has limits, contradictions, and moral concerns.

In *The Voter* (1972/2012), hybridity appears in both language and politics. Achebe's (1972/2012) writing reshapes colonial English by weaving in Igbo words and ironic titles such as Chief the Honourable, which reflect a divided loyalty to both indigenous and colonial authority. Similarly, traditional customs deeply influence the modern electoral process; candidates must honor kinship ties and secure the approval of elders, showing how communal legitimacy continues to shape imported democratic systems. This constant blending captures a complex postcolonial reality that cannot be reduced to simple stories of resistance or assimilation.

Significantly, while consensus and deliberation find a place within Western political cultures as well, *The Voter* (1972/2012) describes them in localized, performative terms, premised on face-to-face discourse, narrative, and ritualized consent. Campaign rallies are similar to mass celebrations filled with drumming, dancing, and public declarations that reaffirm social connections in the midst of political mobilization (Hellmeier, 2021; Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020). These processes are not add-ons to a Western system from another culture but constitutive practices of political legitimacy. This hybrid mode produces neither an entire rupture nor an imperceptible assimilation. Instead, it produces instead a fractured but functioning space, in which colonial and indigenous modes intersect, rival, and work out meaning. Political allegiance in Umuofia is then determined not by policy commitment or party platform, but by how well candidates succeed in negotiating this hybrid space of power, family, and ritual performance.

The character of Roof is a form of hybrid being, but one that ultimately comes up short of Bhabha's (1994) more hopeful theories. His decision to accept a bribe is not an act of subversion in a revolutionary third space, but a grasping gesture toward survival. Achebe shows him not as a man actively subverting power, but as a man caught between duty, opportunism, and indecision. This is most forcibly realized in the ballot box, where "the spring had gone clean out of his walk" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 17). Faced with the ballot, his loyalty

"How could he betray Marcus even in secret?" is at once overthrown by the strength of his material and spiritual involvement: "Five pounds!" "He had sworn the oath on that *iyi*" (p. 17). His final act is one of desperation, not political confrontation.

This internal conflict moves beyond a simple critique of poststructuralism's focus on symbols (Ahmad, 1992); instead, it demonstrates the inherent materiality and affective force of symbols themselves (Newell, 2017). The *iyi* oath, for instance, is not merely a symbolic gesture but a tangible force that produces a powerful emotional and social effect, compelling Roof's actions. Therefore, Roof's position of hybridity earns him no real authority, only emotional tension, highlighted by his physical unease. When he awakens on election day, Roof "masked his deep worry with a surface exertion which was unusual even for him" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 17), showing how much his compromised condition weighs on him. His struggle is not a theoretical debate about identity, but a practical conflict guided by material need. As the bribe is first offered, his feeble protest - "You know I work for Marcus" (p. 15) - soon gives way to the hypnotic temptation of the "red notes on the floor" (p. 15), leading to a "quick decision" (p. 15) fuelled by justification rather than revolt.

Roof's actions are better understood in the context of Mbembe's (2001) concept of postcolonial conviviality, which describes adaptive and frequently contradictory ways people adapt solely to survive within power structures. Roof's deceit is a calculated response to an unachievable circumstance rather than a heroic act of resistance. He is attempting to live with the least amount of damage possible, not to topple the system. Even the *iyi*, a religious symbol, loses its metaphysical significance and becomes a means of coercion. Tradition becomes a political negotiating chip for a corrupt political agreement when Roof takes the oath, "I will vote my paper for Maduka; if not this *iyi* take note" (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 15).

Ultimately, while Bhabha's (1994) theory marks the political and cultural hybridity at work in *The Voter* (1972/2012), it cannot fully convey the ethical, emotional, and material tension Achebe brings to the fore. In this story, hybridity is not so much a space of liberty but a space of extreme moral nuances and uneasy adjustment. Pitting Bhabha against the material force of symbols as well as Mbembe's (2001) more utilitarian perspective, Roof comes into sharper relief. He is not a hybrid self to be venerated but a deeply human one trapped in the hard, at times painful negotiations that postcolonial selves undertake every day.

The Third Space: Internal Negotiation

The third space concept in *The Voter* (1972/2012) must be viewed in light of colonial legacies and socioeconomic forces affecting political decision making. Bhabha's (1994) third space brings out the figure of the lyrical subversive, whereas Achebe's is unsettling. Despite having a hybrid status, Roof is unable to overcome corruption. Instead, he gets caught up in a complicated web anxiety and moral ambiguity. Achebe (1972/2012) suggests this long before the crucial vote: "all morning he had concealed his deep worry from others by an effort on his part which was unusual even for him" (p. 17).

Roof's experience in the polling booth shows the anguish of being pulled between cultural loyalty and economic need, not Bhabha's (1994) notion of negotiation. According to Bhabha's (1994) theory, third space should give rise to a new hybrid identity. Roof's experience, however, disproves this notion. His impotence is seen physically: he "sidled in" with a nervousness in counterpoint to his previous boldness (Achebe, 1972/2012, p. 17). Furthermore, as he makes his way toward the booth, "the spring had gone clean out of his walk" (p. 17). Inside Roof, the hesitance results in a paralysis rather than a creative synthesis. He thinks, the agonizing issue of loyalty presents itself. How can he betray Marcus even in this most private of thoughts? Prior to the material and spiritual weight of his choice crushing this hope: "Five pounds! He knew at once it

was impossible. He had sworn on that *iyi*" (p. 17). It is the awareness of being stuck, not the emergence of a new defiant identity. When he hears the "muffled voice of the policeman" outside, he tears the ballot in his final action; however, this is more of a quick as lightning reflex, not his free choice (p. 17).

Roof's material conditions make the promise of the third space an even harder one to keep. *The Voter* (1972/2012) demonstrates how his troubles are linked to poverty and dependency on politicians, troubles to which a primarily cultural theorizing does not respond. Just as they are products of cultural pressure, Roof's decisions arise from concrete, material dilemmas. His involvement in a corrupt political system is more than cultural hybridity; it is a survival strategy in a situation in which other options do not even exist. Bhabha's (1994) theory has come under severe scrutiny for its clear assumption that hybrid identities are necessarily empowering. Hybridity may also trap people in a perpetual state of moral dilemma and compromise.

Fanon's (1961/2004) concept of the colonized intellectual, caught between the colonial structure and their people provides a clearer understanding of Roof's position. According to Fanon (1961/2004), this figure undergoes a three-stage process: first, a full acceptance of the colonizer's gaze, then a difficult and confused return to the native world, and finally, ideally, committed involvement in the national struggle. Roof appears stuck in the second stage. Similar to Fanon's (1961/2004) rendering of the "false bourgeoisie," Roof is the product of colonial exposure. In other words, he is not wholly ingratiated in the colonial system, nor does he enjoy his society's complete confidence. This space between the two cultures is not just cultural; Roof experiences this emotionally. His actions reveal a deep identity crisis. He is conflicted between staying true to Marcus, the candidate he helps, and the bribe he takes from the opposite side. Fanon (1961/2004) maintains that colonized intellectuals often attempt to reconnect with their past but tend to do so in an artificial way: a "sterile cliché" or over-exoticized representation on account of a heavy damage to their sense of belonging. Just like that, Roof is physically close enough to the villagers, but emotionally and politically far away. His dual voting is less a sign of defiant defiance than of being caught in the web of conflicting pressures and unable to turn into the optimistic, forward-looking leader that Fanon (1961/2004) envisions as the only real change agent.

In this respect, Bhabha's (1994) theory of the third space falls short of paralysis. Having a third space was meant to generate a creative and emancipatory space. However, Roof finds hybridity to be an anxious place. According to Fanon (1961/2004), people who share his experience of resentment like Roof, suffer from structurally induced affective problems. His existence does not represent the strength of hybrids, but the disabling psychic wounds of colonialism that prevent people from acting, from finding community, or from making change.

Moreover, Spivak (1990) mentioned how strategic essentialism can help us understand how things such as the *iyi* are not traditional protective symbols but rather symbols that validate actions. In *The Voter* (1972/2012), the good may no longer be a sacred object but a political tool through which betrayal is made to look respectable. Roof accepts a five-pound bribe from the opponent, who swears on the *iyi*, and Roof swears as well, despite his intention to vote for Marcus already being in place. The *iyi* is used to create a false moral grammar around a strategic choice, rather than out of respect for tradition. The transformation refers to Spivak's (1990) notion that essentialism, while erroneous and inscribed with colonial modes of thought, is often unavoidable in politics and representation. It is "essential that essentialism or essentialization is irreducible" (Spivak, 1990, p. 51). Essentially, whenever one makes a statement, one is referring to some actuality that has a degree of surrendering complexity. The question then becomes whether that simplification is being made actively and strategically. As in, may it be marginalized people or people fighting for power?

Roof's appeal to tradition is tactical. Spivak (1990) cautions against theoretical purity and denounces abstaining from acting politically so that their thoughts may remain "clean" away from the dirt of the actual world. In Roof's case, deploying the *iyi* is a way to be credible in a bargaining-based political culture. He does not simply stand in for his community (*Vertretung*, as Spivak (1990) describes), but creates a narrative (*Darstellung*) of that community, derived from present needs. It follows that a central fault with Bhabha's (1994) third space. Through the reading of Spivak (1990), hybridity can be weaponized. It can lose its subversive potential and become part of a survival manoeuvre. Roof's ambivalent position is not an inclusive space for cultural invention but a precarious one and risky. According to Spivak's (1990) strategic essentialism, identity symbols such as the *iyi* can be, in fact, employed in political games of both resistance and cooperation.

Roof's psychological and emotional struggle also stretches Bhabha's (1994) cultural theory of the third space into what can be argued as a psychosocial space; one mediated by strong emotions like shame, fear, and loyalty (Peters & Geiger, 2016; Taylor, 2015). He fears survival to demonstrate how political choices become complicated. Bhabha's theory (1994) does not fully account for this affective dimension of Roof's case. While Bhabha's (1994) idea of the third space provides valuable insight regarding Roof's situation, it does not capture his mental state. According to Bhabha's (1994) framework, Roof exists in the "interstices" of postcolonial life, occupying the "ambivalent and contradictory space" (p. 37) between the new political order and village tradition. Bhabha (1994) is optimistic that this hybrid position should give rise to something new, making Roof an "active agent of articulation" (p. 50), who is subversive because he fights against the system from within. However, Roof's choices in Achebe's (1972/2012) story led to stalemate and paralysis. Žižek's (1989/2009) cynical idea can help us understand why this is so.

Žižek (1989/2009) argues that today's ideology works precisely by enabling people to act as if they fully know the truth, rather than hiding it. Roof's position is aptly formulated thus, "they know full well what they are doing, but nonetheless, they are doing it" (Žižek, 1989/2009, p. 25). He is not being driven by a "false consciousness." His "cynical reason takes this distance into account in advance" (p. 27). He knows that the election is a charade and loyalty is just a transaction. The fact that he is aware of what is going on does not make him want to resist; rather, it allows him to participate because as Žižek argues "illusion is not on the side of knowledge" but is "in reality itself" (pp. 29–30). Roof takes action as he has an inherent need to survive in a structure in which his options are limited. It does not follow Bhabha (1994) that tearing the ballot is a moment of creating a "new signification of identity." It is a cynical compromise for self-benefit that entrenches the corrupt system while helping him shield himself.

Therefore, Bhabha's (1994) third space becomes a site of complicity rather than a site of resistance when a cynical subject occupies it. Roof employs his hybrid stance to back what a pundit Žižek (1989/2009) termed the "(unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality" (p. 30) and not to challenge the system. His internal conflict is what allows the system to endure, not otherwise. Through his cynical reasoning, participation is made possible. Furthermore, it also legitimizes an election he knows to be rigged. In the end, according to Žižek (1989/2009), the place of postcolonial agency could become a trap in which people reproduce the structures they believe are ineffective.

CONCLUSION

Through this analysis of Chinua Achebe's *The Voter* (1972/2012), this paper has argued that while Bhabha (1994) is a foundational theorist, Achebe's literary realism is a strong corrective. Achebe's depiction of Roof's moral dilemmas in relation to his identity connects his abstract opinions to the harsh realities of postcolonial politics. This way, he shows the limits of theories that ignore systemic corruption and economic survival.

The analysis of *The Voter* (1972/2012) demonstrates that mimicry does not always work as resistance, as explained by Bhabha (1994). Nonetheless, imitation of colonial systems can help with the perpetuation of corruption. Roof mimics their behavior not to subvert but because he must act that way to survive. This is similar to Fanon's (1961/2004) description of postcolonial elites who adopt the colonial's control mechanisms. In the same way, the notion of hybridity can be useful for understanding the mix of languages and cultures in Achebe's (1972/2012) work. However, this notion does not allow us to observe Roof's full predicament. The narrative depicts hybridity not as a third space of empowerment and negotiation but as an area of moral confusion and distress. This contradicts Bhabha's (1994) more optimistic view of hybridity as a subversive or emancipatory relation.

The third space in *The Voter* (1972/2012) has further accentuated these inadequacies. According to Žižek (1989/2009), Roof sees this supposed creative agency arena as the stage for a cynical performance. Due to the situation he finds himself in, he opts for a cynical compromise that fortifies a corrupt system.

Comparing Bhabha's (1994) theories with those of contrasting postcolonial thinkers such as Fanon, Mbembe, and Spivak allows the study to show the need for more sensitivity in understanding postcolonial subjectivity. Achebe's (1972/2012) representation of the protagonist Roof's crises unveils the psychological, economic, and socio-political pressures that shapes their identity and agency in the postcolonial situation, which Bhabha's (1994) exclusive cultural focus almost does not account for.

In conclusion, postcolonial theory is a useful tool to analyze a lot of texts including *The Voter* (1972/2012). Nevertheless, Achebe's (1972/2012) text requires us to look into a more varied and difficult situation, including the material conditions of postcolonial life, the power structures that hold sway, and the emotional reality of postcolonial existence. This study shows the importance of examining theories and not forgetting the contexts at play in postcolonial literature. African literature deserves more attention. A closer look into the complexity of identity, especially in the African literature, could add depth to postcolonial theory.

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