

POSTCOLONIAL QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ESTHER OKONKWO'S, *THE TINY THINGS ARE HEAVIER*

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Abstract

Esther Ifesinachi Okonkwo's, The Tiny Things Are Heavier (2025) is a postcolonial quest for identity, migration, and belonging through the life of a young Nigerian woman, Somkelechukwu, better known as Sommy, who leaves her homeland to study in United States two weeks after her brother, Mezie, attempts suicide. The novel presents a quest for selfhood, a central concern in postcolonial literature, by means of Sommy's emotional, cultural, and physical displacements to interrogate what it means to be home in a world shaped by colonial legacies and globalization. Sommy's migration from Lagos to Iowa exposes her to the alienating effects of Western modernity. She is both fascinated and disoriented by American norms. Sommy enters a complicated relationship with her boisterous Nigerian roommate, Bayo. The novel illustrates diasporic consciousness of race, class, gender, and memory.

The present paper is an effort to trace postcolonial quest of Sommy for identity in Esther Okonkwo's, The Tiny Things Are Heavier by portraying it as an inward journey toward self-acceptance rather than a mere negotiation between homeland and host land. Okonkwo's portrayal of Sommy's emotional landscape—marked by guilt, longing, and resilience—reveals how identity in a postcolonial world is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through experience and affect. Okonkwo's narrative contributes to contemporary African diasporic literature by emphasizing emotional truth and human vulnerability as essential dimensions of the postcolonial condition.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, Identity, and Migration.

Introduction:

Esther Okonkwo represents a **new generation of Nigerian women writers**, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ayòbámi Adébáyò, and Akwaeke Emezi, who present the complexities of **diaspora, gender, and belonging in their literature**. The present paper is an attempt to study Sommy's postcolonial quest for identity in Esther Okonkwo's novel entitled, *The Tiny Things Are Heavier*.

Before to analyse the female protagonist, Sommy, from diasporic point of view, it would be better to unspool the concept of postcolonialism first.

Postcolonialism:

The term postcolonialism is clarified in the following way: "An era or attitude relating to the period after the settlement of one country by another, or very broadly, after the 1960s, when many colonised countries gained their independence" (<https://en.wiktionary.org> Web).

Wikipedia illustrates postcolonialism in an online mode like this:

Postcolonialism is the academic study of the cultural, political and economic consequences of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands. The field started to emerge in the 1960s, as scholars from previously colonized countries began publishing on the lingering effects of colonialism, developing an analysis of the history, culture, literature, and discourse of imperial power.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org> Web)

Chinua Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, Wole Soyinka's, *The Interpreters*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, Nadine Gordimer's, *Burger's Daughter*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's, *Nervous Conditions*, Buchi Emecheta's, *The Joys of Motherhood*, Ayi Kwei Armah's, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ben

Okri's, *The Famished Road*, Abdulrazak Gurnah's, *Afterlives*, are the select postcolonial masterpieces in English literature.

Having a fleeting glance on the concept of postcolonialism, let us study quest for identity of the female protagonist, Somkelechukwu, in novel entitled, Esther Okonkwo's, *The Tiny Things Are Heavier*.

Somkelechukwu's Quest for Identity:

Somkelechukwu arrives in Iowa to attend a graduate school. She is deeply sad because just **two weeks after** her brother Mezie attempts suicide. There is a sense of guilt which disturbs her during her graduation. She feels that she has crossed a long distance from home. She is under the impression that she has left something unsaid which she is unable to express in words.

In Iowa, Sommy feels lonely, homesick, and uneasy. She faces the problem of adjustment in the new world as an immigrant. She feels problem in adjusting with new friends at a new place away from her home land. She observes that she is other in US. The culture in which she has brought up is quite different from the culture in America. She feels suffocated and marginalised in the new world. She becomes nostalgic for her people, for her ancestral land.

Here is a critical remark on the title of novel which reveals suitable themes: 'The 'tiny things' of the title are not merely metaphorical; they are the unspoken tensions, cultural misunderstandings, emotional burdens, and quiet betrayals that accrue in every immigrant story" (<https://www.perplexity.ai> Web).

Sommy shares an apartment with a Nigerian boy named, Bayo. She finds some familiarity in his company. The other Nigerian students share jokes and enjoy life in US. Sommy feels comfortable with Bayo as they belong to the same land. Their culture is same. She feels that he can understand her feelings in foreign country.

In the passage of time, Sommy meets Bryan through social circles of Black students. Bryan is an appealing, smart student. She develops tender feelings in her heart for the said boy. Sommy and Bryan travel to Lagos (Nigeria) during a summer break after spending much time as the students in US. The trip has symbolic significance for Sommy. It is her effort to reconnect with Mezie and home. She renders her sincere effort to retain her identity as Nigerian. At the same time, she is under the impression that she is dangling between Nigerian culture and American fascination.

Sommy, the female protagonist, presents her opinion on the identity in the novel: "What weighs us down most isn't always the trauma we left behind, but the identities we try to build or abandon in the name of survival" (<https://chatgpt.com> Web).

In Lagos, both, Sommy and Brayan feel that that they are from different cultures. Their roots are detached. That is the hindrance between both to get unified. Brayan is under the impression that he is from different culture. This feeling creates distance between both. The cultural, class, and emotional distances become sharper. Sommy thinks that the U.S. has changed her perspective towards life.

Mezie, Sommy's brother, who has been mostly silent, drives with Sommy and Bryan and in one incident **hits a pedestrian. This incident unsettles their relationship. The following critical remark on the novel is appropriate as it cements the notion that Sommy is searching her identity in the novel: "A heart-rending debut novel about a Nigerian immigrant as she tries to find her place at home and in America-a powerful epic about love, grief, family, and belonging"** (<https://www.bloomsbury.com> Web).

At the end of the novel, it is observed that Sommy changed completely. She does not remain the same as she has been in the beginning. Her relationships with family members, with Bryan, with herself are redefined. She becomes mature in the passage of time.

Conclusion:

In the present paper, it is attempted to highlight postcolonial quest for identity in Esther Okonkwo's, *The Tiny Things Are Heavier* by means of the female protagonist, Somkelechukwu. It can be concluded that Sommy **acknowledges the reality that tiny things put heavy burden on human mind. It is better to understand one's pain and try to live with it.** Identity is not a fixed thing in the postcolonial world. It undergoes certain changes. One must live the present life with past and present memories accepting good in past and present culture to make future bright. In all, the novel is bildungsroman which shows Sommy's journey from innocence to experience.

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