

*Original Article*

# Displacement, Mores, and Internal Conflict of the Protagonists: A Comparative Analysis Critique of Ngugi WA Thiong'o's 'A Meeting in the Dark' and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Boundary' Using Edward Said's Orientalism and Othering

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**Abstract:** The world contains various cultures and traditions coming from western and eastern ideas and philosophy. Literature helps us understand these of ideas of self-identity and displacement and how it shapes humanity in a greater scale. This study provides a comparative analysis critique of "A Meeting in the Dark" by Ngugi WA Thiong'o and "The Boundary" by Jhumpa Lahiri with the use of the literary theories of Orientalism and Othering by Edward Said. It explores the main characters of each story in terms of cultural identity, displacement, and personal struggles. In "A Meeting in the Dark", the main character is having a dilemma of choosing his roots of being a Kenyan and the Western ideas that was imposed by colonization. This creates an identity crisis of both cultural and spiritual showing the danger of colonialism on individual and cultural identity. "The Boundary" talks about an Indian-American girl experiencing dual or hybrid identity in a dominantly white American territory. The main character of this story struggles as she is looking for a sense of belongingness and the challenges and hardships of living two cultures, including also family and social expectations, exploring her identity or self and the experience of being other. The use of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism supports the showcasing of the East as exotic or inferior by the West and it tries to justify its dominance and creating cultural barriers resulting the characters' experience "Othering", as they journey their experiences for identity despite the cultural displacement.

**Keywords:** internal conflict, protagonists, comparative analysis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The world contains various cultures and traditions coming from western and eastern ideas and philosophy [1]. Literature helps us understand these of ideas of self-identity and displacement and how it shapes humanity in a greater scale [2]. The idea of Orientalism relates to the untouchable distinction or division between the inferiority of the Orientals or "The East" seen as backward, dangerous, and even uncivilized while the superiority of Westerners is depicted as the main source of knowledge, doctrines, and power [3]. This comparative analysis uses the Literary theory of Edward Said, particularly his ideas of Orientalism and Othering in order to look at how the stories of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 'A Meeting in the Dark' and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Boundary' take on the underlying themes of cultural identity of the protagonists, their social mores, and their psychological conflicts [4]. The two stories are from different places, the result of post-colonialism of Kenya by Ngugi and the diasporic experiences of the United States of America shown in Lahiri's work provide essential basis

for looking how people navigate the idea of oneself and society despite having different cultural demands. The idea of Othering, which is an important element on Said's Orientalism, is the treatment of individuals based on their ethnicity, culture, and race as innately different and most of the time inferior to other people's group [4]. This experience strengthens the clash of (the Self) or the familiar and (the other) or the unfamiliar that provides a feeling of alienation [5]. This comparative critique will focus on how the main characters in the stories experienced "Othering" within their respective communities and how they defy the impositions [6] With the use of Said's theory, this aims to unravel how the authors explicitly unravel the struggles about identity and displacement in opposition to the social expectations and desires of the main characters of the stories [7]. This will provide knowledge into the continuous discourse about belongingness, cultural negotiation, and the idea of identity [8]. The debate of "What is African Literature?" was thoroughly discussed for a very long time now. It asks the questions: Was it literature about the place Africa or it is about the African experience? Was the literature written by Africans or non-Africans? What if an African set his work on other countries, is it still African Literature? Is it still African Literature if the language used is English? These questions are some serious questions to ponder about when reading African literature [9]. The instances of non-utilizing the mother-tongues, knowledge, and traditions of African cultures can be seen as the result of the influence of colonialism [10]. There are countries in Africa that use their colonizer's language as their own official language and their educational system also was established. This led to the use of Western culture as more important and practical in their daily lives especially in today's time wherein globalization is growing at a very fast pace [11]. In the story "A meeting in the dark", the protagonist is an African who possesses a Western name as he is named "John". He went a western education and is alienated and feels a disconnection of his traditional beliefs in its own community and the religion he is adhering to which is Christianity [12]. This provides a glimpse of how Western language and its educational system is seen as practical and even superior [13]. The main character's struggle with its identity, beliefs, and morals is a representation of how Africans struggle with their own culture and fast paced globalization. Jhumpa Lahiri is a dual citizen having both Indian and American citizenship [14]. She is a novelist and wrote multiple short stories. Lahiri is also a representation of some of her works since she also tried what it feels living in America being an Indian [15]. Throughout her experience over the years, Lahiri turned into a person with hybrid identity and that is Indian-American [16]. The story "The boundary" talks about an Indian girl living in a western country facing different life challenges by facing her hybrid identity [17]. The main character is trying to look for a sense of belongingness in order for her to shape its identity but still it reminds her of the feeling of "otherness" [18].

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher used the stories of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 'A Meeting in the Dark' and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Boundary'. The following stories are published in different publications and also different generations. The following are short information of each of the selected text: "A Meeting in the Dark" by Ngugi wa Thiong'o talks about the struggle of a man named John. He grew up in a family wherein Christian values was practiced leaving most of the Kikuyu traditions behind. John is now facing a dilemma of his faith, Western knowledge, and the demands of his family and the society. While he is getting ready to transfer to a university, he experienced a crisis that involves Wahumu, a woman that makes him to face his contradicting beliefs and societal pressure that will change his life. "The Boundary" by Jhumpa Lahiri talks about the life of a girl living the life of an Indian-American family. The story looks into the experience of her family as they transfer to a rural area in America. It highlights the challenges experienced by the main character especially identity, isolation, and feeling of belongingness both cultural and emotional of the protagonist. The researcher identified the juxtaposition of the main characters of each story in terms of their experiences, looking into its

similarities and differences in terms of how the main characters go through their identities, culture, and societal pressure. The researcher asked the questions: How do the main characters of each stories handle their cultural identities and displacement in terms of their societal contexts? What influences do societal standards and family expectations have on the interpersonal relationships and power structures that the main characters of each stories encounter? What are some internal struggles that the main characters face in the story? The researcher then used Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, focusing also in the idea of "Othering" to look upon the cultural identity, power dynamics of Western and the other, and how these relationships can affect the character in forming its identity. As Edward Said explained, Orientalism is the notion wherein it tries to look into the colonial and postcolonial interactions of the "West" and "East" (Orientals), it highlights the power dynamics of the cultural interactions of the two. Additionally, the West is being seen as powerful, civilized, and logical, the idea of "Othering" is where the East is perceived as the contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience. This contradiction provides a hierarchy wherein the East is always inferior and can only be understood using the point of view of the West, which can be used as a reason to justify the West's domination and control.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The stories selected show the juxtaposition of the main characters of each story in terms of their experiences, looking into its similarities and differences in terms of how the main characters go through their identities, culture, and societal pressure. The findings are discussed In "A Meeting in the Dark", in these lines, it is observed that the main character, John, finds himself torn between the traditional Kikuyu culture of his Kenyan forefathers and the Christian principles enforced by Western education. John has a deep feeling of displacement as a result of his dual identities because he feels cut off from both worlds. His Western education prepares him for a life apart from his cultural heritage, but he needs internal struggle to completely accept this new identity. His impending move to a university represents a literal and figurative trip into a life that is becoming more and more cut off from his roots. In a mostly white American rural area, Lahiri's protagonists manage her Indian-American identities. The family feels as if they are being uprooted from their cultural history and forced to adapt into American culture. The family must constantly navigate this line between their own Indian cultural space, the house, and the outside world, which pushes for assimilation and most of the time enforces stereotypes on their identity John saw his father look at him hard, seeming to read his face. John sighed, a very slow sigh. He did not like the way his father eyed him. He always looked at him as though John was a sinner, one who had to be watched all the time. 'I am,' his heart told him. John guiltily refused to meet the old man's gaze and looked past him appealingly to his mother who was quietly peeling potatoes." He even made her stop telling stories to the child. 'Tell him of Jesus. Jesus died for you. Jesus died for the child. He must know the Lord.' She, too, had been converted. But she was never blind to the moral torture he inflicted on the boy (that was how she always referred to John), so that the boy had grown up mortally afraid of his father." John is greatly affected by expectations from his family and society.

#### Discussion

The community's values are at odds with the strong moral and religious standards of his father, a committed Christian. His connection with Wamuhu, who stands in for the conventional life and expectations he is supposed to leave behind, is the perfect example of this contradiction [19]. John feels helpless and stuck as a result of the pressure from society to live up to the expectations of his family and community, which causes him to make terrible choices [20]. This supports the idea of the attractiveness of Christianity to other cultures brought by missionaries using salvation as their ultimate reward [21]. It was repeatedly brought up that Jesus died for you and for the child, therefore

he must know the Lord. "When he talks to me, as he drives me to school, he always says the same thing: that he couldn't make anything of his life. All he wants me to do is study and finish school, go to college, and then go far away from them." "My father yelled, but at that hour no one heard. They said, Go back to wherever you came from. They took the bouquet and left him like that on the ground [22]." In "The Boundary," the lives of immigrants is closely related to family expectations and society norms. The family has challenges in maintaining their cultural identity in a culture where they are often marginalized. Cultural dispersion is often the result of parents' attempts to provide their kids a feeling of achievement and normality in America [23]. This produces a situation where the kids, particularly the daughter, have to figure out how to play their parts in the family and in society at large [24]. They often have to change how they behave to conform to the expectations of both groups. The experience of migration is a stepping stone for other people towards socio-economical change or success, it is because in contemporary societies, there is a fast-paced industrialization, advancements in terms of technology, and also urbanization making it attractive to migrants [25]. "All the girls had been virgins, it being a taboo to touch a girl in that way, even if you slept in the same bed, as indeed so many young men and girls did. Then the white men had come, preaching a strange religion, strange ways, which all men followed. The tribe's code of behavior was broken." "He felt desperate. Next week he would go to the college. If he could persuade her to wait, he might be able to get away and come back when the storm and consternation had abated. But then the government might withdraw his bursary [26]. He was frightened and there was a sad note of appeal as he turned to her and said, 'Look, Wamuhu, how long have you been pre I mean, like this?' 'I have told you over and over again, I have been pregnant for three months and mother is being suspicious. Only yesterday she said I breathed like a woman with a child.'" [27] John is going through a severe inner conflict. He struggles with identity crisis and guilt. His battle with the moral and cultural differences imposed by his culture is reflected in his connection with Wamuhu and the results of their liaison, which push his inner struggle to a breaking point. His struggle to make sense of his two identities drives him to a point of desperation, which leads in a dramatic action that is both a submission to and a rejection of the restrictions placed upon him [28]. This is related to what Fanon points out the effects of colonialism wherein he states that a white man's advancement and culture created an "existential digression to the negro", wherein the western presence might be seen as superior and it might assault the identity of the colonized "My father and I finish up some overripe grapes. I'm about to clear the table when I hear a knock at the door. I see the girls, hesitant, out of breath. They give me a plate with two slices of cake on it: one for me and one for my father. They dash off before I can say thanks." [29] The main character in "The Boundary" battles with her feelings of acceptance and belonging on a personal level. The main character struggles with her sense of self in a setting that constantly makes her feel like the "other." Her attempts to blend in while clinging to her heritage serve as an example of the mental battle that many immigrants experience [30]. Her sense of identity and belonging is constantly put to the test by ordinary choices and interactions, which are at the core of these subtle but significant internal struggles [31]. The best example here is the text provided above, here the two girls gave the main character slices of cake without talking and breathing indicating prejudice and discrimination to her making the main character feel more alienated or other in that experience [32]. This agrees to the notion that national identities are "performed" as it states that identities are not only the notion of you existing or living, but it is actively created through social practices and behaviors [33]. The main character is not practicing what her culture is but is trying to fit in into the place that she is currently staying [35].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis study of Ngugi WA Thiong'o's "A Meeting in the Dark" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Boundary" shows insights of the correlation of cultural identity, displacement, and internal

struggles of the main characters of their respective stories. The researcher chose to study these stories to reveal the notion of identity as a source of conflict, which is influenced by the societal pressures, norms, and family expectations. The story "A Meeting in the Dark" by Ngugi wa Thiong'o shows the arising conflicts that talks about the legacy of colonialism and its harmful effects on one's culture and identity as show by the main character's identity crisis and alienation of his own people's culture. The researcher found out that John becomes disconnected from his own culture which is Kikuyu because of the aftermath of having formal Western schooling and also him adhering to Christianity; symbolizing the superiority of Western power. This analysis does not just focus on the individual struggles of people from territories that experienced post-colonialism, but it also tells the general consequences or outcomes of imposing one's culture and the conflict for having an identity inside the walls wherein dogma, beliefs, or ideas are being imposed. In addition, the researcher also found out that "The Boundary" by Jhumpa Lahiri shows the different aspects of being an Indian-American family and experiencing a diasporic life. This brings focus on the hardships and challenges experienced by the main character or the daughter in the story as she is directing and molding herself to her double identity. This brings that the author shows the challenges of managing both juxtaposing cultures in her identity as her own family tries to preserve their own culture while continuously living a life in America. The idea of "Othering", wherein the characters' relationship and personal identity are getting affected by the constant stereotyping them as outsiders or outcasts, is shown evidently in the story. In totality, both of the authors provided knowledge of showing various cultures by offering observant perspectives on the consequences of cultural displacement and progression of identity. This study provides a substantial examination of how humans function in the face of existential and cultural challenges, contributing to the body of knowledge on postcolonial issues.

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