

SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF ABI DARÉ'S *THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE* AND CHIGOZIE OBIOMA'S *THE FISHERMEN*.

¹Okekunle, Michael Olamide, ²Adeniyi, David Sesan, ²Oguntunji, Abidemi Emman,
²Williams, Catherine Olutoyin

¹Department of Languages and Literary Studies, Babcock University, Ilishan - Remo, Ogun State.

²Department of English Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between socio-cultural practices and identity formation in Nigerian literature with focus on two selected Nigerian novels, Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* and Chigozie Obioma *The Fishermen*. Erik Erikson's Psycho-social Development theory was used to examine how cultural settings and norms influence the formation of individual identities, emphasizing the impact of parental guidance, societal expectations, and religious beliefs through a detailed qualitative analysis. The findings reveal that parental neglect fosters resilience but also leads to tragic consequences. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of supportive family system. The paper concludes that societal norms and religious beliefs in the challenges and opportunities presented by socio- cultural dynamics greatly help in shaping characters' identities in the texts. Recommendations stemming from this study advocates for creating supportive environments for identity exploration, fostering open communication, integrating diverse literature in education, and advocating for societal change to eliminate harmful cultural conditions.

Keywords: socio-cultural, identity, values, Nigerian literature, parental neglect

Introduction

Society is a complex and organized network of individuals who come together to interact, cooperate and share common norms, values, and institutions. It is a fundamental aspect of human existence, providing the structure within which people live, collaborate, and establish relationships. Societies can vary greatly in size, culture, and structure, but they all play a crucial role in shaping human behavior and beliefs (Moffett, 2024). Identity is a multi-layered concept that encompasses the characteristics, beliefs, and attributes that make an individual or a group of people unique. It is influenced by a variety of factors, including cultural, social, psychological, and personal elements. It encompasses aspects such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, values, and personal experiences, all of which contribute to a person's sense of self and belonging in the world (Sabaliauskienė, 2024).

Society and identity are composite concepts that plays fundamental roles in human life. Society refers to the network of social relationships, norms, values, and institutions that individuals are part of, while identity encompasses the various characteristics and traits that define who we are as individuals. The relationship between society and identity is dynamic, as our sense of self is shaped by the societies we belong to, and, in turn, our identities influence how we engage with and contribute to those societies. This interwoven relationship between society and identity is central to understanding human behavior, culture, and the way we perceive ourselves and others (Hogg, 2021). Society and Identity have a complex and intertwined connection. At its heart, society is the framework that controls how people interact with one another and also holds all of the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions together. Identity is not static but rather dynamic, changing over time and

being shaped by societal circumstances (Denik, 2017).

Literature has always been a key tool for reflecting man and the society, both in its oral and written forms. Literature continues to be a reliable tool for the portrayal, understanding, and interpretation of human endeavours such as religion, class conflict, politics, interpersonal relationships, societal conflicts, and identity creation. Literature cannot possibly portray society without mentioning the people.

Literature Review

Culture includes the beliefs, customs, practices, and values that characterise a particular group's way of life, whereas societies are complex systems made up of people, institutions, and common norms (Lillis & Tian, 2010). The classic definition of culture by Lillis & Tian (2010) was "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life." This term emphasises how much culture shapes how people perceive the world and their place in it. People use culture as a framework to interpret their experiences and create their identities. Basically, culture is a broad term that encompasses a society's behaviors, behavioral patterns, institutions, norms, beliefs, conventions, arts, laws, knowledge, and habits. Culture is typically associated with regions or a particular location. To put it another way, culture is the methods of thinking, doing, and possessing things that collectively make up a people's way of life (Kaguhangire-Barifajj, Nkata, & Lwanga, 2021).

The "socio" component alludes to the institutions and social structures that make up a society. Family, education, religion, politics, and economic systems are just a few of these institutions. Individuals interact with and negotiate cultural values and norms within various social systems. When analysing how socio-cultural values affect identity, the interaction between the "socio" and "culture" becomes very important. In reaction to the sociocultural circumstances in which they are positioned, individuals negotiate their identities (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2014). This negotiating process

entails adjusting to or opposing social institutions as well as embracing and resisting cultural norms.

An individual's identity is fundamentally shaped by socio-cultural values from an early age. The development of one's identity can be significantly influenced by cultural factors during childhood and adolescence, according to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1959). An individual's sense of self is influenced by the cultural values that are passed down through family, community, and educational systems. Gender roles and expectations are frequently governed by cultural conventions. These expectations may have a significant influence on how people form their gender identities. According to research, how people perceive and express their gender is influenced by cultural views of masculinity and femininity (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Understanding identity's multifaceted character and its impact on people's lives is crucial for fostering well-being and understanding human development.

Theoretical Framework

Erik Erikson's Psycho-social Development Theory

Since its introduction in 1963, Erik Erikson's psycho-social development model has been a key theory regarding the phases of human development. Erikson identified eight developmental stages, each of which is represented by a general age range. However, due to culture, social change, and distinct stages of growth, there is debate about age ranges. Erikson asserts that there are psycho-social crises in each stage (trust vs. mistrust; autonomy vs. shame and doubt; initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority; identity vs. role confusion; intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. stagnation; integrity vs. despair) and that each stage presents a challenge to the person in terms of completing a psycho-social task. A psycho-social crisis is an innate conflict brought on by sexual and physical development as well as societal changes. These challenges serve as a catalyst for forming a person's personality and affect how they connect with others, navigate the environment, and build self-esteem throughout the course of a lifetime. According to Erikson, going through psycho-social crises and getting through

them can either result in a healthy personality or one that is fractured and damaged.

In this study, emphasis will be laid on 'Identity vs Role Confusion'. It is one of the key stages and fifth stage in Erikson's theory. It typically occurs during adolescence, roughly from ages 12 to 18. In this phase, according to Erikson's theory, people struggle to develop a distinct and cohesive sense of who they are. Answering fundamental concerns about one's identity, values, and place in society is necessary for this (Erikson, 1968). The development of one's total psychosocial self depends on developing a sense of identity. Role confusion results from a weak sense of identity not being developed. Role-conflicted people find it difficult to develop a consistent self-concept and may be unsure about their values, views, and life objectives. According to Erikson (1968), this may cause emotional upheaval, identity crisis, and a lack of direction. The process of forming an identity during adolescence is significantly shaped by socio-cultural values. The context in which teenagers discover and establish their identities is influenced by cultural norms, familial expectations, and society ideals.

Data Analysis

Socio- Cultural Practices and Identity Formation in Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*

Gender and Social Class Stratification

The Girl with the Louding Voice is a painful and triumphant novel about the power of fighting for ambitions and sense of self. It tells the story of a teenage girl growing up in a remote Nigerian community who longs to receive an education so she can find her louding voice and speak up for herself. Despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges in her way, Adunni never loses sight of her aim of escaping the life of poverty and several socio-cultural entanglements into which she was born so that she can create the future she wants for herself and help other girls do the same. Adunni, the protagonist is determined and aspires to become a teacher in the future. She is of the opinion that education will raise her standard and give her a voice just as her mother said to her.

The social class stratification is evident in the novel, as Idowu, Adunni's mother is denied the rights to marry Ade whom she loves because Ade's parents are wealthy and Idowu is from a poor uneducated family of which she ended up marrying Papa (Adunni's father). Therefore, she made up her mind that no matter what it will cost her, her daughter will be educated.

Adunni, God knows I will use my last sweat to be sending you to school because I am wanting you to have chance at life. I am wanting you to speak good English, because in Nigeria, everybody is understanding English and the better your speaking English, the better for you to be getting good job. In this village, if you go to school, no one will be forcing you to marry any man. But if you didn't go to school, they will marry you to any man once you are reaching fifteen years old. Your schooling is your voice, child. It will be speaking for you even if you didn't open your mouth to talk. It will be speaking till the day God is calling you come. That day, I tell myself that even if I am not getting anything in this life, I will go to school. I will finish my primary and secondary and university schooling and become teacher because I don't just want to be having any kind voice . . I want a louding voice. (pp 23-24).

This dream was however cut short when Idowu (Adunni's mother) died. Adunni's father who had earlier promised to ensure Adunni is educated reneged on his promise to his late wife when he could no longer pay for Adunni's school fee of ₦7,000.

Thirty thousand naira is very plenty moneys. I know Papa cannot find that moneys even if he is searching the whole of the Nigeria because even my school fees moneys of seven thousand, Papa didn't have. It was Mama who was paying for school fees and rent moneys and feeding money and everything money before she was dead. (p. 9)

Despite her deep desire for knowledge, she is forced to abandon school due to her family's financial struggles and societal expectations. Her father, who sees her as a means of financial relief,

arranges her marriage to an older man, Morufu, in exchange for money and material benefits: *"My papa say he is selling me to be the wife of Morufu, the taxi driver; the man with two wives already"* (p. 25). This transactional nature of marriage reflects the devaluation of female autonomy, as young girls like Adunni are treated as commodities rather than individuals with aspirations. The patriarchal system in which Adunni is embedded prioritizes male authority and control, thereby restricting women's access to personal and economic independence.

Furthermore, Adunni's experiences with Morufu's household illustrate how gender oppression intersects with class hierarchy. Within the polygamous setting, the wives compete for their husband's attention, reinforcing the notion that a woman's value is tied to her ability to bear children and serve her husband. Morufu's first wife, Labake, embodies the bitterness and despair that result from being trapped in an oppressive marital system. Her violence toward Adunni is not only an expression of her personal suffering but also a reflection of the internalized oppression that many women in her position endure: *"She lift her hand and give me one slap on my face. 'You be small girl. Small rat. You think you can come and take my husband?'"* (p. 47).

The theme of class stratification is further developed when Adunni escapes Morufu's house and becomes a domestic worker in Big Madam's household. Here, she experiences another form of social oppression, this time shaped by economic disparity. Although Big Madam, a wealthy businesswoman, has broken barriers as a successful female entrepreneur, she perpetuates the exploitation of poorer women by mistreating her domestic workers. Adunni, despite being in a female-led household, finds herself subjected to physical and verbal abuse, which underscores the novel's critique of class divisions within gendered spaces: *"Big Madam say, 'You are useless girl, stupid girl,' and she slap me, one, two, three times on my face"* (p.153). The contrast between Adunni's social status and that of her employer illustrates how economic power does not necessarily translate to feminist solidarity. Instead, class hierarchies often override gender-based

unity, leaving poor women like Adunni vulnerable to multiple forms of oppression.

Subjugation of Women and Domestic / Sexual Oppression

In the text, the author portrays the subjugation of the girl-child and female gender by the male gender; believing that their career and personal ambitions are not necessary and that they are only for marriage and house duties ... *Girls are only good for marriage, cooking food and bedroom work"* (p. 37). Adunni was married off to Morufu at the age of fourteen and Kike, the first daughter of Morufu who is of the same age with Adunni is also married off to Baba Ogun who lost his wife six months ago and *he is finding another one, a young girl like me to make him feel like a young man.* (p. 64).

As Adunni is aspiring to go to school and become a teacher, on the other hand, Kike is a very good tailor who also wishes to learn more but has no support from her father; who already made up his mind to use her bride price to repair his other taxi. Their ambitions and vision got shattered due to the societal and cultural belief of early girl child marriage. *"I wish I am a man... all the mens in our village, they are allowing them learn school and work, but us the girls, they are marrying us from fourteen years of age"* (p.64).

It was easy for Adunni's father to sell Adunni off for marriage because she is a girl child and since Morufu, the old taxi driver who already had two wives and four children promised to pay the community rent of thirty thousand naira being a part payment for her bride price and bring four he-goats, agric fowl, bag of rice, e.t.c. *"The rent money is among your owo-ori"* (p.5.) Similarly, Khadija was married off to Morufu when she was fifteen years all because he wanted a male child *"I marry him when I was fifteen years and I have three children for him, three girls that he didn't want because of they are girls". I want two boys children... I will send them to school...* (p. 37). After the forceful child marriages, maltreatment and domestic violence follows *"Even when Mama was not dead, Papa was always shouting her.... He beat her... he give her one slap, swelling her cheek... that womens are not supposed to talk when mens are talking"* (p.22). In Morufu's house too, Khadija immediately gave

Adunni in her first night as a wife, the golden rule of the house which is no one must talk back at their husband for any reason. *"I am the king in this house. Nobody must talk back to me. Not you, not the children, not anybody. When I am speaking, you keep your mouth quiet. Adunni, that means you don't ask question in my front, you hear me? (p.36)"*.

Adunni was sexually oppressed by Big Daddy (Chief Adeoti) the husband of Big Madam. She quickly learns that Big Daddy is a dangerous man. He is constantly drunk and lecherous, and he makes it clear that he is attracted to Adunni. *"Adunni, dunni-licious, He licks his lips, tongues climbing over his moustaches. Beautiful name for a beautiful girl. He touch his chest, show a hand full of plenty hair, thick and curling".(p. 140)*. Infact, Adunni later found out that Big Daddy forcefully slept with Rebecca, their former house help when Abu (their driver) gave her the letter he found under the seat in the car. *"My name is Rebecca... I am pregnant for Big Daddy. Big Daddy forced me to sleep with him at first, then he promised to marry me if I am sleeping with him all the time".. (p. 279)*.

Apart from the men – female subjugation and harassment, the author also depicts women subjugating women. The Wellington Road Wives Association (WRWA) are fond of mocking and ridiculing the maids that works for Big Madam. They (Florence, Kiki, Sade and Caroline) made jest of Adunni because of her inability to pronounce words correctly. She pronounced *"womens"* instead of *"women"*. *"Did she just call us womens? She say, laughing, her eyes filling with water. My days. That is hilarious"* (p.163). When Adunni unconsciously poured the tray of stick-meats on the floor, Big Madam smashed her shoe right inside the middle of Adunni's head. Amongst all the Wellington Road Wives, Ms Tia seems to stand out. After witnessing the way Adunni was maltreated by the other women, she took a step further to move closer to Adunni. Ms. Tia is a modern woman who is not afraid to challenge traditional societal or cultural issues because was once a victim too.

The Struggle for Identity and Finding One's Voice

In the midst of the sexual and domestic harassment in Morufu's house, Adunni's identity and strong determination began to conform. She

began to experience psycho-social crises and internal conflicts – *"Enitan say that Morufu have a house. A real, working car, plenty food to eat, money to be giving Papa and Kayus and even Born-boy. Money for Kayus is a good thing. I can try, like Enitan say, to be happy"* (p. 29).

Adunni's fractured sense of self is in accordance with Erik Erikson's Psycho-social Theory, which states that psycho-social crisis is an innate conflict brought on by sexual and physical development as well as societal changes. These challenges serve as a catalyst for forming a person's personality and affect how they connect with others, navigate the environment, and build self-esteem throughout the course of a lifetime. Fear gripped her hearts, her vision, ambition and long-time goal is scattering and shattering as the society (her father) decides to sell her off in marriage in exchange for money and food items and as she faces sexual and domestic maltreatment. *"My eyes was just watching myself, watching as the picture of schooling that I put on top a table in my heart was falling to the floor, scattering into small, small piece"*. (p. 32).

After a while, on the same day that Kike, their husband's first child is being married off, Khadija ask Adunni to follow her on a visit to the midwife. While on the way, Khadija started to have labour pains. She told Adunni that their stop is Kere village. On getting to Kere village, she told Adunni to go into a house and call out a man Bamidele, apparently, Bamidele is responsible for Khadija's pregnancy. According to Khadija, she decided to seek the help of Bamidele to become pregnant when all effort to have a male child through her husband has failed and having been in love with Bamidele before she was forced to marry her husband, she ran back to him for help so that she can have a male child and be free from constant threat by her husband who made it clear that if she do not give him a male child, she will be returned to her father's house.

Unfortunately, Khadija did not make it back to Ikati alive. She died at the banks of Kere River where Bamidele took her and Adunni with a promise to bring a special soap for a supposed sacrifice that ought to be done on Khadija to prevent Khadija and the baby from dying. After a while, it became apparent that Bamidele deceived

them. Bamidele refused to return and Khadija died right on the spot where Bamidele left her and Adunni. Adunni ran back to Bamidele's house only to be told that he has been away for some days and so Adunni was dumbfounded she had to run back to her father's house to avoid the looming injustice that will come upon her should anybody in the village link her to the dead body of Khadija at Kere river. *"Wake up, Khadija, I beg with all of my soul. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. But it is of no use, Khadija have dead. And Bamidele have not come back"* (p. 83).

Adunni had to run for her life when she narrated all that happened to her father, and he insisted on reporting to the village chief and Morufu. On her way, she met Ruka who promises to come and dance for her when she has a new baby. The statement Ruka made births out numerous thoughts that depicts a splintered sense of self caused by all the societal and cultural malaise Adunni is facing.

"I am thinking of what Ruka just say, about coming to dance with me when I have a new baby. Will my Papa and Morufu be shocking with anger and surprise when they hear that I am missing? Will they think it is because I kill Khadija that I am running away? Will my Papa be having heart pain because of me? Will they put my Papa inside prison until they find me come? Or will Papa know that I am running away? And if they find me, will they hear what I am saying about Bamidele? wipe my face with the back of my hand and sniff up the catar from my nose. This decisions is too hard, and maybe I am no doing the correct thing" (p. 94).

The above excerpt from the text explicates Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (Identity vs Role Confusion) which states that role-conflicted people find it difficult to develop a consistent self-concept and may be unsure about their values, views, and life objectives. According to Erikson (1968), this may cause emotional upheaval, identity crisis, and a lack of direction. The process of forming an identity during adolescence is significantly shaped by socio-

cultural values. The context in which teenagers discover and establish their identities is influenced by cultural norms, familial expectations, and society ideals as vividly portrayed in the life of Adunni, the protagonist.

As Adunni ran out of Ikati village, she went in the cover of the night to Agan village where Iya, an old woman and one of the beneficiaries of her mother's good heart lives. The woman had initially promised to help her if she ever needs help. She ran to her for help although she met her in a critical health condition that made her contemplate her decision. Iya decided to help her, she sent for her brother, Mr Kola the Agent who lives in Idanra village. Mr Kola's agency supplies house help to influential people in the city of Lagos. So, it is the very next day after Khadija's demise, Adunni finds her herself on the way to the city of Lagos in Mr Kola's car. In Lagos, Mr Kola took Adunni to Big Madam's house, in Lekki where she is expected to work as a maid. She realises that this is another prison as it became quite clear that the education she so desperately seeks would not be found in Big Madam's house and if she was ever going to make it out of this prison, she needs to do something about her life.

Similarly, Ms Tia's mother had a manual for how her daughter's life would go. Her mother influenced her identity. She made sure Ms Tia doesn't have any friend, every moment was spent studying. She wanted her to be an accountant and Ms Tia herself disliked numbers or calculations. She wanted her to get married at age twenty-two and have children immediately because she wanted to become a grandmother before a certain age. *"My mother had a manual for how my life would go and I rebelled – got stubborn- at every decision she made for me"* (p. 189). Obviously, her mother's attitude affected Ms Tia's identity and sense of self as she made her so unhappy and not wanting to have a child *"I don't think I will be a good mother". I didn't even want to bring children into this world"* (p. 189).

Abi Dare also shows how religious beliefs shapes one's sense of self, when Ms Tia's mother-in-law took her to a Prophet for it is believed that she has been unable to conceive because Ms Tia has one evil spirit that is swallowing the baby. That Ms Tia brought the spirit when she was coming from

abroad and the spirit needs to be sent back. After praying for her, the prophet took her to Mother-In-Jerusalem Tinu, the head of the female birth-makers. *"She is a powerful woman in the baby-making-miracle ministry"* (p. 259). Ms Tia was taken to the river and Mother Tinu whip her with brooms and she began to scream.

"And so, I watch as they whip and whip and whip, as Ms Tia is rolling on the ground and screaming, until her fine smooth skin is having puncture from the sand, and until her while body is becoming the red of the earth". (p. 263).

After the rituals, Ms Tia's already stopped screaming and her body is already bleeding blood, her back is full of so much marks. The church women throw the brooms into the river, they shout *"THE EVIL OF CHILDLESSNESS HAS BEEN CHASED OUT. PRAISE BE TO THE LIVING HIM! The other four women, they clap their hands to say, ELI, JAH"* (p. 264).

Ms Tia rebirth Adunni's initial identity and strong desire to go to school. Kofi, the chef at Big Madam and Big Daddy's house, is one of the few male characters in the text who doesn't abuse or exploit women. He is a Ghanaian immigrant who is using the money he earns working for Big Madam to finish building a house back home, where he has a daughter around Adunni's age. Kofi is a kind and compassionate man who likes Adunni and looks out for her. He tells her about the Ocean Oil Secondary School Scholarship, which he sees as her one chance at freedom *"Abu took me to the Ocean Oil office on our way from the market yesterday, Kofi say, I picked up the application form for you and kept it in my room. Adunni, this is your only chance at freedom"* (p. 156). He also warns her to be careful around Big Daddy, whom he knows to be a dangerous man.

Ms. Tia is kind and respectful to Adunni, even though Adunni is a poor village girl. She sees Adunni's potential and helps her to develop her skills. Ms. Tia gives Adunni English lessons, and she helps her to prepare for the Ocean Oil Secondary School Scholarship. *"I got you early Christmas present, some of the best books on grammar, she say. This here is called Better English"* (p. 222). Ms. Tia also encourages Adunni

to write about her experiences, and she helps her to find her voice. *"Adunni! You got in!, You won a place in the scheme! I am not wait ONE MORE DAY! I will fight Florence if I have to. I am coming to get you now! Pack your stuff"* p.302.

Ms. Tia is a complex character who is both privileged and marginalized. She is privileged because of her wealth and education, but she is also marginalized because she is a woman. Ms. Tia uses her privilege to help others, and she is a role model for Adunni. When Adunni first meets Ms. Tia, Ms. Tia treats her with kindness and respect, even though the other women at the function belittle and disrespect Adunni. Ms. Tia's kindness and compassion help Adunni to grow and develop as a person. Ms. Tia shows Adunni that there is another way to live, and she inspires Adunni to fight for her dreams.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory views that going through psycho-social crises and getting through them can either result in a healthy personality or one that is fractured and damaged. Adunni's sojourn ended well and she later became a healthy personality having overcome all the societal and cultural malady that she grapples with. Her struggle, ambition and perseverance helped her to be awarded the Ocean Oil scholarship, and also to free herself from forced labor, and start working toward her goal of becoming a teacher. *Adunni! You got in!, You won a place in the scheme! I am not wait ONE MORE DAY! I will fight Florence if I have to. I am coming to get you now! Pack your stuff"* (p.302).

Socio- cultural Practices and Identity Formation in Chigiozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*

Cultural, Societal, Religious and Familial Influences

The tragic tone and nature of the events in *The Fishermen* stem from the mystic pull of the uncanny figure of Abulu at the Omi-Ala river. His prophecy against Ikenna – whether or not it actually has any basis in a preconceived truth – affects not only the latter but also the rest of his brothers. The brothers' encounter with Abulu forces them to undergo a "metamorphosis" and several forms of identity crises, as Benjamin describes in one of the chapters. This metamorphosis becomes a point of definition for

the relationship of the brothers as well as the conception of their masculinities. The narrator goes to tell us about the history and the grim image of the river Omi-Ala. He says, "*Omi Ala was a dreadful river: long forsaken by its inhabitants of Akure town like a mother abandoned by her children*" (p. 27). However, the narrator says that was not the history of Omi-Ala for he recalls that;

Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name, and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja, Osha, mermaids, and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies. This changed when the colonialists came from Europe, and introduced the Bible, which then prized Omi-Ala's adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians, began to see it as an evil place. A cradle besmeared (p. 27).

The four brothers; Ben, Ikenna, Boja and Obembe father was abruptly, transferred to work in Yola, a distant town. This distance makes it hard for him to come home daily or often as he would like. Their father is the strict disciplinarian of the family, so with him out of town, Ben and his older brothers, try out new things instead of studying as their father expects them to do. He wants them all to have a good education and had even plots professional careers for them. While their mother is busy taking care of her shop, the home and the two youngest children, they play football and other games in the streets for a while, but soon decide to go fishing in the Omi-Ala River. Despite it being dreadful and superstitious to Akure residents, the boys find it as a place where they can find peace and adventure. However, the residents hold the river with prejudice emanating from its bad image.

The author indicates the source of the bad image is because of dark rumours that people committed all sorts of evils on its banks (p. 28). The river is a symbol of African culture. In the text 'the river' is depicted as pure and a place where the residents of Akure performed their rites before the coming of colonialism. After the arrival of colonialism, the river is depicted as forsaken by natives thereby acquiring the dreadful image of "evil". Once a pure river, it supplied the earliest

settlers with clean drinking water and fish. The river before the invasion of colonialism and him brainwashing the locals was a religious place "Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it" (p. 27). The river, is not only a source of water and food, but also a religious place.

The image of the river, however, changed when the colonialists invaded Africa and introduced the Bible. Colonialists converted natives' religious beliefs to Christianity and their perception of their culture changed. They started to see their cultures as evil, superstitious and retrogressive. Because of shrines and rituals performed at the banks of the river, the newly converted Africans abandoned it and the river and the shrine became a detested place. "*This was supported by accounts of corpses, animal carcasses and other ritualistic materials floating on the surface of the river or lying on its bank*" (28). Although, the Christians abandoned the filthy river because of its sin, the boys enjoy adventuring to the river. They find peace while playing in the river and it does not only work as a place for adventure, but also, they fish and sell them for their economic growth. Their interest in the river led them to discover and learn a lot especially of the madman's prophecy.

Abulu was not in that state of mind from birth, his father went on a Christian pilgrimage to Israel and never returned. It was believed by most people that he was killed by a bomb in Jerusalem, while one of his friends who went on the same pilgrimage said he had made his way to Austria with an Austrian woman and settled there. Abulu and his brother Abana lived with their mother and their elder sister who, by the time she was fifteen, took up whoring business and then travelled to Lagos to practice prostitution in full. The food restaurant owned by their mother couldn't cater for the needs of both of them; she could not afford to pay their school fees and provide other amenities. This made the two brothers to commence stealing. It was after robbing a rich widow of a briefcase full of money, and running from the mob pursuing them that Abulu got knocked by a fast-moving car. Abana rushed him to the hospital, but, "Abulu's brain cells, had floated out of their compartments into foreign zones in his head, changing his mental configurations". He raped his mother; his brother

was vexed and he beats him mercilessly. This made Abulu to run into the streets and there his street madness commences. *"Abulu wandered about naked, dirty, smelling, awash with filth, trailed by a sea of flies, dancing in streets, picking up waste from bins and eating it p. 98"*

It was to the shock of the parents to learn their children's behaviour. "so, Adaku you sit here and tell me in all truth that my boys- Ikenna, Bojanonimeokpu, Obembe, Benjamin- were the ones she saw at that river; that dangerous river under a curfew, where even adults are known to have disappeared?" (p. 49). Although the father blames his wife for the children's misbehaviour when he was away. Their mother had to summon her husband from Yola after the boys were reported to have gone fishing in river Omi Ala.

All this tragedy occurs during the absence of Mr. Agwu, the father. The novel opens with Benjamin precisely discussing about this situation: "My brothers and I became fishermen in January of 1996 after our father moved out of Akure, a town in the west of Nigeria, where we had lived together all our lives. His employer, the Central Bank of Nigeria, had transferred him to a branch of the bank in Yola... p. 9" This marks the first mention of the brothers' becoming fishermen, with Mr. Agwu's moving away being pointed out in this statement as a cause. His absence plays a role in the boys being able to go to the river Omi-Ala and perform acts as fishermen. When they get into trouble for it, the brothers are punished by Mr. Agwu, who also curiously states: *"Such adventurous spirit is the spirit of men. So, from now onwards, I want you all to channel that spirit into something more fruitful. I want you to be a different kind of fishermen..."* In this manner, Mr. Agwu acts as a hegemonic and authoritative figure of masculinity for the brothers. He re-contextualizes the acts of the brothers as ones carried out by the "spirit of men", and, moreover, impels the role of being fishermen to them. This being said; however, Mr. Agwu's expectations are not met by the brothers. Instead of being "a group of fishermen who will be fishers of good dreams", Obembe and Ben, for example, become another type of fishermen.

Identity Formation: The Psychological Unraveling of the Brothers

Ikenna has to struggle against the seed planted in him by the prophecy of the mad man, Abulu. As Ben narrates: *The fear, after destroying Ikenna's well-being, health and faith, destroyed his relationships, the closest of which was with us, his brothers. It seemed that he had fought the internal battle for too long, and now wanted to get it over with (122).* The episodic contact with Abulu led Ikenna, Boja, Obembe, Benjamin to an extrovert life, making them become aggressive and harsh. It also changed their worldview by making them see society as a jungle; a place where the strong bully and trample down the weak. Thus, to survive they became nasty and predatory. The narrator discloses: *"Ikenna had just turned fifteen, and to my eyes, he was now a full adult able to grow beards. Yet the thought that he was old came with the strong fear that once he grew into an adult, he would disconnect from us"* (p 58). This statement suggests a change of character in Ikenna which Benjamin the narrator perceives as waywardness, carefree attitude and signs for future dissidence and disconnection from the family.

The prophecy given by Abulu triggered Ikenna's identity crises *"Ikenna, you will be bound like a bird on the day you shall die.. Ikenna, you will be mute, Ikenna you will be crippled, your tongue will stick out of your mouth like a hungry beast, and will not return back into your mouth, Ikenna, you will swim in a river of red but shall never rise from it again, Ikenna, you shall die like a cock dies"* (pp. 89-90). Ikenna interpreted the prophecy to mean that one of his brothers will murder him *"He saw a vision that one of you will kill me"* p. 94. The fear of the prophecy affected Ikenna's sense of self as "his mother's efforts to heal her son, Ikenna, were wasted on him. For the prophecy, like an angered beast, had gone berserk and was destroying his mind with the ferocity of madness, pulling down paintings, breaking walls, emptying cupboards, turning tables until all that he knew, all that was him, all that had become him was left in disarray". – *"to my brother, Ikenna, the fear of death as prophesied by Abulu had become palpable, a caged world within which he was irretrievably trapped, beyond which nothing else existed"* p. 109. He began to walk to school alone;

waking up early just to avoid walking to school with his brother (Boja), skipping breakfast, lunches and dinner especially when the food is eba or pounded yam that requires him to eat together in the same bowl with his brothers. As a result, “*he began to emaciate with until deep incurvatures were carved between his collarbones and his neck and his cheekbones became visible. Then, in time, the whites of his eye turned pale yellow*” p. 110. Ikenna’s fractured sense of self is in relation to Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development, which states that going through psychosocial crises and getting through them can either result in a healthy personality or one that is fractured and damaged.

Ikenna mother could not hold her emotions and fear seeing Ikenna’s negative change in attitude. She decided to take him to church to be cleansed from the spell Abulu had cast on him but Ikenna refused to follow his mother to the church for the cleansing. In the church, the pastor instructed the members to refute the prophecy in a rapturous session of fierce prayers. Things seems to be worse after the cleansing prayers as Ikenna said to his mother forcefully “*Listen, Mama, I’m a scientist, I no longer believe there’s a God*” p. 117.

The identity catastrophes in the novel refers to the psychological and emotional crises that engage the characters Ikenna, Boja, Benjamin, David in a struggle for self-discovery and specific adjustment with the external world, the society. Apparently, these characters are going through puberty and experiencing therefore adolescent crises as outlined in Erikson (1968) Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, “puberty or adolescent stage may cause emotional upheaval, identity crisis, and a lack of direction”. The process of forming an identity during adolescence is significantly shaped by socio- cultural values. The context in which teenagers discover and establish their identities is influenced by cultural norms, familial expectations, and society ideals. Under normal circumstances, their differences should be oriented towards sexual dreams and self-discovery but this is not the case.

The representation of identity in *The Fishermen* provides a way for the novelist to expose the true personality of characters involved and their ability to endure or not the difficulties confronting them. The climax in the novel is the

confrontation of Agwu’s family with the death of their two children: Ikenna and Boja. *Father and mother are so affected that the narrator describes the latter thus: “vacant eyed, sat in an ematiated body that was packed into a black blouse. She’d become frail and pale”* (p,187).

Abula’s prophecy eventually came to fulfillment when Ikenna and Boja engaged in a serious quarrel which led to Ikenna and Boja’s death. – “*this person lay facing the refrigerator, his wide-opened eyes still and fixed in one place.. His tongue was stuck out of his mouth.. half-buried in his belly was the wooden end of mother’s kitchen knife, its sharp blade deep in his flesh. The floor was drenched in his blood*”p.148. Ikenna’s posture was exactly the same as prophesied by Abula, even Obembe continued to utter with quivering lips the refrain “river of red, river of red, river of red.....”. Obembe flashed back to the prophecy. Boja also had to drown himself in the well at the backyard.

After Ikenna and Boja’s death, Obembe and Ben began to have a fractured sense of self too. Obembe became so determined to kill their enemy (Abulu); of which they later did. They believed that their brothers died “because there was a division between them” but they were more convinced that their “brothers died because of Abulu’s prophecy” (pp 201-202). Obembe began to smoke and began to have a change in attitude, “*he blew the smoke out of the window as I watched in horror at the sight of my brother, only two years older than me, smoking and sobbing like a child*” (p. 203).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the crucial role of socio- cultural practices in shaping individual identities within Nigerian societies. It emphasizes the need for critical reflection on these values and their potential impact on individuals and groups. The novels collectively illustrate the intricate interplay of parental influence, societal expectations, and cultural/religious factors in shaping individuals' identities. The absence of parental guidance can lead to both resilience and tragedy, while societal norms and spiritual beliefs can either confine or emancipate individuals in their pursuit of self-discovery. The texts prompt reflection on the pivotal role of family support,

cultural acceptance, and personal autonomy in navigating the complexities of identity formation.

Recommendations

This study recommends the following;

- Parents or Guardians should foster a safe, supportive and correctable environment where children can explore their individual identities freely and authentically.
- Parents should try to give their children the best they can afford financially, academically and in other areas of life.
- Children should be well trained morally and not hide under the umbrella of lack or poverty to engage in theft or all sorts of vices and immoral acts.
- Parents should encourage open communication about identity-related questions and concerns their children might have.
- Educators can integrate culturally diverse literature into the children's reading experience to expose them to different perspectives and narratives.
- A social re-engineering is needed to abolish all harmful and negative socio- cultural conditions.

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