



Postcolonial Feminist Study of Sia Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged* (1996)

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Abstract

This paper will address the status of women in postcolonial societies, against a colonial legacy of patriarchal ideologies in Sia Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged* (1996). It analyzes the socio-political problems faced by females which have followed colonialization, independence and migration in Samoa.

Key words: colonialism, feminism, double colonization, patriarchy.

Postcolonial feminist theory, which emerged from the gendered history of colonialism, is primarily concerned with the representation of women after the end of colonialism to voice out concerns relating to marginalized women in postcolonial societies. Post-colonial feminists believe that gender differences, as a result of patriarchal ideologies, had continued to deprive women of their rights and voice. According to Mishra, post-colonial feminine writers are not interested in "dismantling family order, customs and traditions, but seek to find balance and harmony by removing age-old constrictions which suppresses women at home and in society" (131). Women are more commonly marginalized in postcolonial societies due to the conventional patriarchal ideologies that drastically subjugate their voices and actions.

Using Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", this paper aims to show the reasons for double colonization and its consequences on women in the Pacific, after independence. Women continue to play a passive role in society, with their roles limited to being mothers, wives, daughters, and housekeepers in male dominated family and

community. In this paper double colonization in Sia Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) is discussed and analyzed from a feminist postcolonial viewpoint, which is certainly related to the marginalization of the females in the Pacific postcolonial society till today.

Where We Once Belonged is written by Sia Figiel, a renowned novelist, who also won the Commonwealth Prestigious Writer's prize for the novel. Born in Samoa, Figiel satirically retells the history of her country and people through a colonized perspective. A typical Samoan lifestyle, before and after being colonized, is woven beautifully through the female protagonist and other characters in the story. The narratives in the story, incorporated with the tales of Samoan mythology, enables the reader to interpret and visualize aspects of island life and people after independence. Ashcroft et al. claims that although most countries have gained independence from their colonizers, they are still indirectly subjected in one way or another to the forms of neocolonial domination. Figiel illustrates the strong influence of western colonialism on the villagers in the novel, who unconsciously have favored the western culture and religion over theirs.

Said, in his theory on orientalism, categorizes the world into occident, which stands for the West and the orient, which stands for East, which are further categorized by placing the occident in the center, while the orient is the margin. This viewpoint is evidently demonstrated by the colonizers, where they dominated, restructured and exercised authority over the colonized. Accordingly, from a feminist's viewpoint, as contended by Tyagi (46), Said's theory of orientalism in relation to the concept of double colonization identifies the men as the occident and the females as the orient. The West has stereotyped Pacific women as sensual, bare-breasted, sexually available women in an idyllic tropical country. However, Figiel has defiled these stereotypes to show that the Pacific has a history and a distinct culture, that has been there long before colonization and that Pacific women had been misrepresented by the West.

Gayatri Spivak, in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues that "if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow." The concept of double-colonialization in the novel is seen through the female characters, who are firstly fighting against colonialism and its influence and secondly the patriarchal ideologies that existed and continued after independence. Postcolonial feminist theory has concerned itself with the authenticity of discourses between the white feminists and her indigenous counterparts in voicing the concerns of the colonized women. Strong-Leek (31) asserts that White feminists overlooked the historical, cultural and racial specificities that affected the colonized woman. Figiel, in *Where We Once Belonged* became the voice of her people, her culture and her country's post-colonial experience, which makes this novel worthy of discussion, especially from a feminist post-colonial perspective.

Double marginalization of female characters is evident through many instances in the story. The plot follows a young Samoan girl Alofa, the protagonist, who is full of hopes and dreams but she is always suppressed as indicated by Figiel for she "knew the rules to Malaefou politics too well" so "when the lights went out, I dies with them" (15).

The females in the novel seemed to live very regulated life and are constantly subjugated by fundamentalist Christian concepts of purity and 'goodness'. The girls were expected to spend their days doing the "dullest of all chores", be at home or church to meet the societies expectation of being a good girl. Both colonialism and patriarchal ideologies dictate the behavior of the females in the novel. Alofa's suffering is further evidenced when she says "what were we supposed to do to reverse the verdict that we were only in-betweens? And why was it so important for us [girls] to be good" (5). Figiel, through these dialogues between characters reveal how colonial principles, like religion continue to co-exist with patriarchal ideologies in Samoa, thus creating a ruthless exploitation of the females.

Lili, another female character in the novel epitomizes double colonization. Her father, the patriarchal representative and Mr. Brown, the colonial force, both reinforce dominance on her. When she is raped by her incestuous father, Iosua, the village people blamed and questioned her chastity when she got pregnant (59). Lili is removed from school and is criticized while her father Iosua continues his normal life. Likewise, Mr. Brown takes advantage of Lili by sleeping with her, although she is too young for him. Figiel describes Mr. Brown's impotency in detail from Lili's perspective who, despite his old age, exploits her body by his hands and mouth. Lili's struggle against the colonial repression and the patriarchal dominance exemplifies Gayatri Spivak's research on "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The subalterns, after the colonial rule, were referenced to women in a patriarchal society. Spivak describes how the historical intersection with patriarchy makes it impossible for women to speak and therefore they continue to suffer, with little scope for improvement (83). Figiel illustrates this clearly through the struggles of the female characters, through the vignettes in the novel.

Post-colonial feminists argue, that although women were dominated by men centuries ago, the status and experiences of post-colonial women was more complicated because their experiences can never be isolated, either as a woman or as a member of the colonialized community (Nejat and Jamili, 41).

Figiel, in her depiction of Filiga, Alofa's father, symbolically comments on the power of patriarchy in Samoa. Filiga married thrice, and each time he blamed the woman for either not giving birth to children or her inability to keep him happy, which later presents justification for his extra-marital affairs. Filiga's actions demonstrate how insignificant women were to men in Samoa. Ironically, Filiga was also the disciplinarian, who beats up Alofa's friend, Makaoleafi and shaves off her hair, as a form of punishment when a pornographic magazine is found in her bag. Later when Alofa is found naked with a boy, Filiga violently beats her. Filiga's character epitomizes the male-dominated, authoritarian and violent society, which exercised power over the weak. The society turned a blind eye on what Filiga and Iosua did as males, but when the girls and women did the same, they were severely punished and publicly humiliated. Even females who are supposedly innocent like Alofa's mother Pisa, suffered abuse and humiliation, hence were doubly colonized.

Figiel also comments on how the society desire for males over females. This is demonstrated when Pisa gives birth to Alofa. Figiel mourns the orthodox assessment of females as a "curse" in "growing up to shame their aiga by continuing the cycle of being seduced by middle-aged men" (104). The female characters in the novel were preached about chastity and virginity and warned against sexual experimentations. Here Figiel debunks orientalism, which stereotypes Pacific women as having sexual freedom in Samoa. Figiel shows through the female characters that sexuality is highly restrained and the society spurns and stigmatizes any female caught in the act. None of the female characters in the novel have any real control over their lives and although they seem cheerful, none seem particularly happy. Through the female characters in the story, the readers can successfully identify the effects of colonialism on the females, who are simultaneously in clash with the island culture, which undoubtedly favors the males.

From the above analysis of *Where We Once Belonged*, it becomes evident that Pacific societies are male dominated and women are marginalized. Consequently, women are doubly colonized; firstly,

by the colonial power and secondly by the patriarchal society. Edward Said's theory of orientalism in the context of othering and Spivak's analysis on female subaltern as the subject to economic, cultural and political marginalization more than males are described and contextualized clearly by Figiel in the novel. Set in Samoa, the author shows a community and culture which is patriarchal, prejudiced, violent and adulterated by contact with western society and the colonial religion after independence. The female characters suffer both patriarchy and colonial domination and hence are excluded from most social, cultural and political activities in post-colonial Pacific society.

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