



(Re) claiming Cultural Agency: Afrocentric Strategies in Challenging Hegemonic Narratives

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Abstract

This article examines Afrocentrism as a critical and prescriptive framework for reclaiming cultural agency and contesting hegemonic Eurocentric narratives. Grounded in MK Asante's formulation of Afrocentricity, the study situates Afrocentrism alongside key postcolonial theories—Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity, and Michel Foucault's power/resistance dynamics—to show how Afrocentric strategies both diagnose misrepresentation and actively re-center marginalized voices. The paper outlines Afrocentrism's core aims: confronting dominant powers, recognizing the construction of "Otherness," and restoring the centrality of ethnic sub-groups. It engages debates on agency by drawing on Giddens and postcolonial critics to argue that Afrocentrism insists on autonomous cultural self-definition in the face of essentializing portrayals that silence non-Western subjects. Comparative readings of Said and Asante highlight complementarities and gaps: while Said's contrapuntal reading and "voyage in" expose how imperial texts embed prejudice and open avenues for counter-narratives, critics argue his account underplays active forms of resistance. Bhabha's emphasis on ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity problematizes claims of total colonial authority by revealing every day, often unconscious forms of subversion, though his focus on cultural discursivity has been critiqued for minimizing possibilities of structural change. Foucault's notion that power presupposes and inscribes resistance informs the paper's treatment of opposition as plural, contextual, and frequently rendered invisible by dominant institutions. The study further incorporates James C. Scott's ideas of hidden transcripts and in-frapolitics to account for low-profile, pre-political forms of dissent that may later erupt into public opposition. Throughout, the authors caution against divorcing cultural analysis from material structures of domination, noting critiques that discourse-centered approaches can understate repression's concrete effects. Concluding, the article argues that Afrocentrism's distinctive contribution lies in its prescriptive insistence on (re)framing history, identity, and knowledge from African-centered reference points. By combining critique of representation with an affirmative project of cultural reclamation, Afrocentrism offers both analytical tools and normative mandates for amplifying silenced voices and challenging hegemonic power relations.

Keywords

Afrocentrism; cultural agency; hegemony; Otherness; postcolonial resistance

1. Introduction

Afrocentrism, a literary and academic theory initially championed by M.K. Asante, seeks to culturally address the disavowal and marginalization of Afro-ethnic minorities. It advocates for (re)claiming their narratives and questioning the mainstream Eurocentric and hegemonic perspectives regarding these minorities. This paper aims to (re)instate the cultural agency of such ethnic groups while challenging existing power structures.

This paper argues that Afrocentrism, as articulated by Molefi Kete Asante, offers a distinct and necessary paradigm for reclaiming cultural agency by synthesizing a critique of hegemonic representation akin to Said's *Orientalism* with a proactive project of recentering that moves beyond the passive resistance often implied in Bhabha's theories of hybridity.

The primary objectives of Afrocentrism within academic discourse are multifaceted: (a) to confront dominant powers, (b) to acknowledge the concept of "Otherness," and (c) to (re)institute the centrality of ethnic sub-groups. To this end, the paper is organized into several subsections, which will explore the following topics:

- Afrocentric Perspective on "Otherness"
- Sub-groups Agency
- The Notion of Dominance
- Opposition According to Edward Said
- Afrocentrism and Orientalism: Approaches to Hegemony and Cultural Appropriation
- Resistance/Opposition According to Homi Bhabha

2. Afrocentric Perspective on 'Otherness'

Afrocentrists emphasize the concept of "Otherness" to highlight the importance of challenging social identities while preserving cultural roots, viewpoints, and individualities, which Afrocentric beliefs hold in high regard. This focus arises from recognizing the marginalization of certain groups labeled as outsiders in their social and cultural contexts. Essed (1991) states that:

Power exists as long as the group stays together against the "others." Exercising power over other people affects them, through action or inaction... whether or not those who exercise power are aware of the success or consequences of their practices and whether or not the other party is aware of the power being exercised over him or her.

This discussion reveals how "The Other" is entrapped within Western dominant systems due to historical, cultural, and communicative traditions, resulting in the loss of choice control for specific groups.

3. Sub-groups Agency

Agency is a central concept in Afrocentric theories. Giddens (1979) defines agency in "Central Problems in Social Theory" as the capacity of individuals to act independently of social structures in making their own decisions. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000) relate agency to whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action or if their actions are influenced by the ways their identities are constructed. Both definitions reflect the ongoing "structure" and "agency" debate in social sciences.

In anthropology, agency has often been distorted by deep-rooted Eurocentric assumptions that undermine individual self-transformation (Keane, 2007). Conversely, post-colonial discourse emphasizes the importance of agency as it signifies the ability of post-colonial subjects to engage with or resist imperial power (Ashcroft et al., 2000).

Afrocentrism supports representational practices that define ethnic sub-groups. Those represented as cultural automatons are subjected to techniques that essentialize and silence them, depriving them of their voice and autonomy. The colonial past exemplifies a total denial of sovereignty for entire communities, with agency confined to the colonizers alone, who impart a purported benevolence to the colonized (Doty, 1996). As Roxanne Doty noted, this incapacity to exercise agency continues to be inscribed in the cultural identity of the contemporary non-Western "Other." Any exercise of agency that challenges established orders tends to be ignored or suppressed.

4. The Notion of Dominance

The notion of dominance calls to mind Michel Foucault's concept of power. In his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault posits that "power itself inscribes its resistances," and thus seeks to contain them (Foucault, 1972). He further states, "there are no relations of power without resistances," noting that these resistances are more significant precisely where power is exercised (Foucault, 1980). It can be inferred that Molefi Asante, in formulating his theory

of Afrocentricity, draws from Foucault's notion of power-knowledge. In his exploration of power and resistance, Foucault categorizes resistances as diverse and contextual, describing them as "a plurality of resistances... that exist in the strategic field of power relations" (Foucault, 1980).

Interestingly, Foucault's classifications of "opposition" align with the various elaborations by other thinkers, including Asante. Since opposition frustrates and threatens established power structures, recognizing it entails acknowledging claims regarding the injustices committed by such power. Yet, resistance and opposition are often dismissed as lawlessness, crime, or irrationality (Slemon, 1998).

5. Opposition According to Edward Said

Many scholars have criticized Edward Said for downplaying the potential for Oriental resistance in *Orientalism*. Said argues that Orientalism positions the Westerner above the Easterner, relegating the latter to an enduringly passive role with minimal resistance (Said, 1979). Robert Young in *White Mythologies* and Aijaz Ahmad in *In Theory* echo similar sentiments, asserting that despite Said's oppositional analysis, it lacks a robust theory of agency and resistance. Ahmad suggests that a notable failure of *Orientalism* is its examination of Western textual representations of the non-West without considering how these representations are received and actively engaged with by colonized intelligentsias (Ahmad, 1992).

Ahmad critiqued Said for neglecting individual agency within Oriental societies, especially among intellectuals who possessed both the means and motivation to reflect critically on their representation in colonial texts. This consideration is something that Asante has adeptly recognized, avoiding oversimplification in understanding these dynamics. Notably, Said's minimization of Oriental opposition becomes paradoxical when compared to his disagreement with Foucault's stance on individual agency. While Foucault emphasizes the impersonal or collective nature of power, Said insists on individual authors' contributions to textual formations (Said, 1986).

Despite critiques regarding the lack of a theory of opposition, *Orientalism* itself serves as a significant act of resistance, inspiring a plethora of counter-discursive works across various social science fields. Its resistance lies in its capacity to expose how the misrepresentation of entire geographical regions or specific ethnic groups has rendered them vulnerable to hegemonic control. Consequently, Said's work aligns with Asante's Afrocentric framework, which addresses the complexities of power dynamics in cultural appropriation.

Said himself recognized shortcomings regarding resistance in *Orientalism*, noting Foucault's approach as one that often minimizes resistance, suggesting "a kind of scholarship that confronted the problem of power from the position of someone who believed that ultimately very little resistance was possible" (Said, 1986). By distancing himself from Foucault's historicist framework, Said prepared to engage more intensively with notions of resistance in his later works, advocating for the critic's role as one that must "provide resistances to theory" and remain attuned to historical realities and human interests (Said, 1996).

6. Afrocentrism and Orientalism: Approach to Hegemony and Cultural Appropriation

Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* is highly relevant to our analysis. Said asserts that power and ideology, both consciously and unconsciously, produce and sustain hegemonic systems. He emphasizes the existence of cultures of resistance, highlighting figures like Toussaint Louverture and Franz Fanon for their intellectual contributions to liberation movements. Said draws a distinction between two forms of resistance: primary resistance, which involves "literally fighting against outside intrusion" for the recovery of geographical territory, and secondary resistance, which encompasses "ideological resistance" against the pressures of the colonial system (Said, 1993).

Said approaches resistance from a textual perspective, introducing concepts such as "contrapuntal" reading and the "voyage in." Through "contrapuntal reading," Said illustrates how texts are embedded with the prejudices, beliefs, myths, and biases of their cultural context; these elements may be obscured within literary representations (Said, 1993). This form of reading suggests a way for the subjects of imperialism to "speak back" and assert their right to equal treatment in the interpretation of texts, allowing for a consideration of both imperialism and opposition to it (Said, 1993).

As Shelley Walia notes, the ideology of resistance is central to both Said's and, by extension, Asante's contrapuntal methodology. Their aim is to assert the right of non-Westerners to (re)construct and (re)frame cultural realities expressed in dominant discourses (Walia, 2008).

Regarding the "voyage in," Said describes it as an oppositional form of engagement with hegemonic power. This

involves an effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, transforming it and acknowledging marginalized or forgotten histories (Said, 1993). He argues that resistance is not merely a reaction to imperialism but represents an alternative way of conceiving human history, advocating for multivocal perspectives (Said, 1993). The "voyage in" is characterized as a hybrid cultural work, signifying adversarial internalization in a context marked by ongoing imperial structures. Notably, this voyage is part of a cultural coalition between anti-imperialist resistance in the peripheries and oppositional cultures in Europe and the United States (Said, 1993).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said outlines two modes of resistance aimed at challenging Western narratives to reclaim identity and history from imperial influence. Counter-narratives play a significant role in these acts of resistance, possessing considerable deconstructive power (Said, 1993). However, critics often find Said's approach incomplete. Michael Murrin, for instance, critiques Said for failing to discuss the "occasions for revolution," arguing that while Said emphasizes overseas resistance, he overlooks how the military defeat of imperial powers can enhance resistance by demoralizing occupiers (Murrin, 2000).

7. Resistance/Opposition According to Homi Bhabha

Homi Bhabha, a prominent theorist in colonial discourse, challenges Edward Said's portrayal of colonial discourse as totalizing. He argues that "colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 200). Bhabha contends that the authority of colonizers has always been contested and undermined by the ongoing, often unconscious, resistance of the colonized. While he acknowledges that resistance is pervasive among native or ethnic minorities, he characterizes it as more passive, manifesting in forms such as "mimicry," "dissimulation," and "sly civility."

According to Bhabha, although native or ethnic minorities might appear compliant or even complicit in the colonial process, they remain "the unwitting and unconscious agents of menace [and resistance]" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 210). This conception of resistance is not necessarily framed as a politically motivated act; rather, it emerges from the contradictions inherent in the dominant discourse, which is never entirely controlled by the colonizers (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha argues that colonial discourse undergoes a process of hybridization, enabling forms of subversion that undermine its authority. In this way, all colonial discourse is fraught with schisms and contradictions, resulting in subversive hybridity.

In *Postcolonial Resistance*, David Jefferess notes that "the native cannot return the language of authority without altering it," ultimately subverting the intentions of the powerful (Jefferess, 2006, p. 7). Although Bhabha's notion of ambivalence produces unsettling and resistive effects, it operates independently of the wills of both the powerful and the disempowered. Interestingly, despite framing resistance as somewhat undeclared, Bhabha considers mimicry—as the foremost manifestation of ambivalence—"signs of spectacular resistance and opposition" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 121). He argues that mimicry can highlight colonial ambivalence, thereby disrupting its authoritative claims.

Critics have pointed out that Bhabha's constructions of "ambivalence," "mimicry," and "hybridity" risk limiting resistance to merely a failure of colonial authority to assert itself fully. This critique suggests that his approach conflates cause and effect and that overemphasizing the impossibility of total colonial authority neglects the potential for structural change (Young, 1990).

Bhabha's theoretical framework resonates with Foucault's assertion that resistance is inherently linked to power. His model serves to vindicate what Young describes as "forgotten moments of historical resistance" or overlooked instances of pre-nationalist subaltern resistance (Young, 1990). Bhabha indicates that, despite overwhelming power and the absence of equitable social conditions, subtle forms of opposition exist that do not conform to conventional ideas of active or violent anti-colonial resistance. This notion reinforces the idea that "colonial culture is always potentially and strategically insurgent" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, p. 126).

Moreover, Bhabha emphasizes the variability of colonial discourse itself. A discourse that exhibits resilience is invariably weakened by its own contradictions. Both Edward Said and Homi Bhabha have faced critiques for focusing predominantly on culture, identity, and narrative while neglecting the question of opposition. For instance, Bill Ashcroft mentions agency and opposition through the lens of discursivity, introducing the concept of "interpolation" to describe how colonized subjects exert counter-discursive agency (Ashcroft, 2000). This agency enables colonized individuals to inject counter-discursive tactics into dominant narratives without necessarily asserting a unified anti-imperial agenda.

The main critique of discourse-based approaches to resistance and opposition centers on their tendency to "divorce the cultural from the material structures and experiences of colonialism," overlooking the reality that

hegemonic authority is often maintained through direct repression (Jefferess, 2006). Thus, their analyses of opposition may lack significant practical implications.

Another insightful contribution to the theory of resistance is that of James C. Scott, who introduces the concept of "hidden transcripts." Scott argues that there exists significant potential for resistance among subjugated peoples, even in extreme power imbalances. This potential is often expressed through dissenting discourses that may remain dormant but can become publicly oppositional during moments of crisis (Scott, 1990). In these instances, a hidden transcript may publicly manifest, effectively breaching the etiquette of power relations and challenging the status quo (Scott, 1990).

However, Scott balances his claims of resistance potential with the concept of "infrapolitics," which he describes as "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (Scott, 1990, p. 19). This notion acknowledges the complexity of transitioning from hidden to overt dissent, suggesting that such transitions may be influenced by cultural, rational, or circumstantial factors. Additionally, Scott's "infrapolitics" reflects a pre-political consciousness among subordinate groups, a concept that may inadvertently carry Eurocentric biases (Hobsbawm, 1989).

8. Conclusion

This scholarly investigation has diligently sought to illuminate the multifaceted issues pertaining to Afrocentrism, agency, resistance, and opposition as discussed within the sphere of post-colonial discourse. It has tried to accentuate the imperative nature of interrogating prevailing narratives, asserting cultural identities, and acknowledging the complicated power mechanisms that influence social frameworks.

On a global scale, this paper has endeavored to spotlight the complex dialogues surrounding Afrocentrism, agency, and resistance within the domain of post-colonial studies, thereby emphasizing the centrality of challenging hegemonic power hierarchies and amplifying voices that have historically been silenced.

In examining the intersections of Afrocentrism with postcolonial theory, this paper has demonstrated that the Afrocentric project is fundamentally one of agency reclamation. While it shares Said's commitment to exposing hegemonic discourses and Bhabha's insight into the inherent instability of colonial authority, its unique power lies in its prescriptive call to actively (re)claim a cultural 'frame of reference.

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