

Yinka Shonibare

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One of the main premises of the modernist program of thought is based upon a separation between the past and the present, or the “traditional” and the “modern”. The advent of the so-called “modern world” was hailed by its advocates as the beginning of a new age completely distinct from that which had preceded it. Leaving behind a past of uncertainty, barbarism and irrationality, the modern age was, by comparison, an enlightened one, and an age in which man was progressing towards inevitable self and technological improvement. This powerful binary opposition of the traditional/modern has had tremendous influence on the way we conceptualize the world today. It has produced a number of corollary binaries, which seek to divide the world along numerous –and usually false or restrictive- discursive lines, creating what the cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes as “imagined communities” (Hall 1991:18) and equally imagined identities. Binaries such as the West/Orient, civilized/primitive, and progressive/reactionary, have played an instrumental role in propounding the idea that certain cultures are inherently superior to others. Meanwhile history, by the modernist definition, was conceived of linear, and also had situated discursively as having taken place in Europe alone.

Yinka Shonibare, a British artist of Nigerian origin, seeks to interrogate and debunk the essentializing categories of the “modern” and the “traditional”. His work, displayed at the Museum of Contemporary art Sydney between September 2008 and February 2009, is an exploration of the troubled and complex relationship between Nigeria and its British colonizers, as well as an investigation his own identity as a diasporic man, having spent his upbringing navigating between the two cultures. Uncomfortable with the false and rigid distinctions drawn between “European” and “African” identity, Shonibare’s work questions and blurs these boundaries. Shonibare argues that popular and written histories of colonialism in Africa are an inadequate representation of its real and diffuse effects. He, on the other hand, seeks to re-imagine the past from the margins, drawing out hidden forces and giving voice to silenced historical players. Meanwhile, he objects to the imposition of essentializing identities upon people, cultures, and himself as an artist, instead advancing a conception of identity which sees it as multivalent, and asserting that the only stable factors in its construction are hybridity and complexity.

One of the most prevalent themes in Shonibare’s work is the assertion that both “tradition” and “modernity” are highly constructed categories, rather than neutral or descriptive ones. By playfully merging the visual emblems of “modern” European culture and “traditional” African culture and confusing what is being signified, Shonibare is able to show that neither of these modes of representation can be taken to denote truth. In the words of Nancy Hynes, Shonibare “deliberately incorporates common signifiers of “African-ness” in order to deconstruct them.”(Hynes 2001: 62) Certainly, a startling paradox is presented to the viewer upon initial inspection of Shonibare’s sculptures and installations. Brightly coloured “African” cloth is fashioned into exorbitant Victorian costumes, while in other instances (as in *Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour*, 1996-1997) it is wrapped around luxurious Baroque furniture.

To the unknowing eye, this cloth is an instant and clear marker of African-ness and ethnicity. While the fabric looks “traditional” and “African” and is indeed often worn outside Africa to denote African pride, it is actually an industrial, mass-produced and modern product; Indonesian Batik manufactured in the Netherlands, Britain (and some West African countries) and subsequently exported to West Africa where it is a popular but foreign commodity (Hynes 2001: 62). As Shonibare himself commented in a 1996 interview, “Sometimes people confuse representation for what it represents... If you see a woman walking down a road and she’s wearing African cloth, you might think- now there’s African-ness, true Africanness. But that cloth, these clothes, are not African-ness” (quoted in Hynes 2001: 62). As Shonibare hints that nothing is as authentic as it may seem, notions of an “authentic” and “traditional” African culture consequently become highly problematic.

In the words of Hynes, Shonibare’s use of this cloth is also an “apt metaphor for the entangled relationship between Africa and Europe and how the two continents have *invented* each other.” (Hynes 2001: 60). Indeed, The term “Africa”, as the Hall posits, is certainly more than simply a denotation of geographical location. Rather, it is an identity created in and through various discourses which is used to bring distinct people and cultures under a single powerful rubric with numerous connotations (Hall 1993: 231-233). Moreover, the label “Africa” along with its corollaries “ethnic” and “traditional” have been used to historicize the people of the continent; to mark their cultural practices as belonging in and to the past. This process of historicizing indigenous populations, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, has been used as a powerful justification for the colonial program (Chakrabarty 2000: 7). As he explains:

“Historicism... posited time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West. In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization. In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity or Enlightenment.” (Chakrabarty 2000: 7)

By this logic, those belonging to ethnic groups outside of Europe were considered “primitive”, and their cultures deemed archaic, “traditional”. These were people “*not yet* civilized enough to rule themselves” (author’s italics, Chakrabarty 2000: 8) and consequently had to be taught how to do so by civilized and “Enlightened” authorities. While these colonial discourses have indeed lost considerable credence since the mid 20th century, the legacies of the colonial mindset are still abounding and have taken diffuse forms. For instance, in the last three decades, various governmental authorities, as well as the popular press, have garnered the power of similar discourses in an attempt to brand Islamic culture as archaic, regressive and fanatical, belonging to the past rather than the present. Similarly, in his discussion of “exoticism”, Nicholas Thomas highlights that it is this mindset which has marked countries like Japan, Korea and Hong Kong as “exotic” and traditional, even though they are clearly modern in both political and economic terms (Thomas 1994: 173).

It is important to note however, that the false and restrictive ideas of “modernity” and “tradition” have not only been used as a tool by colonial powers to impose physical and discursive domination over other cultures. Indeed, the power of pseudo-traditions has been harnessed by various Fundamentalist regimes in order to attack liberal and democratic ideals. Many these regimes seek a retreat in the certainty and “truth” of an imagined –and indeed, a rigid and unchanging- past, as well as in mythic traditions in order to defend programs based upon racial purity, religious orthodoxy and cultural traditionalism. For instance, romanticized

notions of shared national “traditions” have been utilized by political leaders in both Meiji Japan and Nazi Germany.

While Shonibare’s work seeks to address constructed notions of “tradition” and, particularly the “traditionally African” are, it also reveals that “modernity” and “the West” or “Europe” are equally as constructed and artificial categories. The *Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour* (1996-1997) hints that Europe is as much constituted by its *position of difference* to Africa as Africa is constituted by the discourses of difference imposed upon it by Europe. A parody of “period” rooms in Museums, the parlour is opulently furnished with the hallmarks of Victorian and Baroque luxury. Ironically, however, all of the furnishings in the room are covered with cloth printed with the repeated motif of black footballers. By combining and merging these contradictory signifiers, Shonibare confuses their meanings, and is consequently able to probe his audience into an interrogation of their assumptions. The identity of the “philanthropist” is never revealed, as his/her presence is notably absent. The piece begs the question, “What is African? What is European? Who creates and consumes these identities?” (Hynes 2001: 61) Indeed, Shonibare’s answer is that identities never simply just *exist* or *are*. They are constructed. Hall’s explanation for this process of construction is very convincing,

“Europe’s external relations with its Others has been central to the European story since its inception, and remains so. The story of European identity is often told as if it had no exterior. But this tells us more about how cultural identities are constructed - as ‘imagined communities’, through the marking of difference with others - than it does about the actual relations of unequal exchange and uneven development through which a common European identity was forged.” (Hall 1991: 19)

The use of these “Others” to delineate the boundaries of personal and cultural identity, has certainly been very prominent in colonial and even Enlightenment discourses. As Heather Goodall has posited, this process of identity construction and the imposition of harder and clearer boundaries upon the identities of various cultures and populations, was compelled by the anxieties of European colonialists about “uneasy power, insecure identity and ‘inner’ enemies” (Goodall 2009: 6). Shonibare seeks to unveil the hidden forces that circulated within colonial as well as Enlightenment discourses, and as a consequence, draws attention to the “darker” side of Enlightenment thought. *Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour* makes fun of the hypocrisy of the ideology of Enlightenment. Implicit in the title is the figure of the European Colonizer masquerading as a philanthropist; a man who masks exploitation behind liberal pretexts, and to paraphrase Chakrabarty, preaches his Enlightenment humanism at the colonized, and at the same time, denies it in practice (Chakrabarty 2000: 4). Similarly, in *The Scramble For Africa* (2003), an installation in which 18 headless figures are positioned around a table poised in deep discussion over the equitable division of the African continent between them, Shonibare hints that Enlightened thought concealed a damaging and harmful didacticism and paternalism which justified the European invasion of Africa and the subjugation of the people of the continent to brutal and oppressive rule. Meanwhile, in the *Age of Enlightenment* (2008) series, several famous Enlightenment figures have been re-imagined as disabled; one rests upon crutches, another sits in a wheelchair; perhaps Shonibare’s way of highlighting the extent to which modern Europe relied on the labour and trade provided by African colonies to sustain its prosperity.

This theme of the silenced and under-represented African presence in the historical development of modern Europe is one of the major ones in Shonibare's work. The headless figures that predominate Shonibare's installations, can indeed be read, on the one hand, as a metaphor for the silenced and depersonalized Africans living under European oppression in Africa, and sold into the slave trade abroad. The use of African cloth also serves the dual purpose of drawing attention to the hidden African presence in European life, giving a voice to the Africans who have indeed been "silenced" for many centuries by being denied representation, and whose experiences have been written out of Western histories.

Another under-represented historical phenomenon that Shonibare draws attention to is that of violence, or specifically what Homi Bhabha describes as "validity of violence in the very definition of the colonial social space" (Bhabha 1987:). This idea is particularly resonant in *How Blow Up Two Heads At Once (Female)* (2006), a sculptural piece in which two female mannequins are positioned pointing guns to each others heads. Once again, Shonibare's intentions are far from clear-cut. It is unclear whether these figures are African or European. However, this very ambiguity as well as the fact that the women are positioned in identical stances and dressed in similar costumes, points at both the physical violence that was an undeniable reality of colonial rule, and the silent psychic violence endured by colonial subjects in the wake of being forced to 'see' and 'know' themselves by the definitions of colonial authorities. Shonibare seeks to unmask what Bhabha describes as the "interpositions, indeed collaborations, of political and psychic violence *within* civic virtue, alienation within identity..."

In his exploration of Victorian Excess in *The Swing* (2001) and *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002) Shonibare also advances some striking inversions of the stereotypes of sexualized African body. In the discourses of the day, the Victorian body was represented as austere and modest, the antithesis to the sexualized bodies of "rude" and "uncivilized" ethnic peoples. Shonibare inverts this stereotype, the bodies wrapped in Victorian garments are very sexualized. By recontextualizing, and indeed, reversing the stereotype Shonibare probes his audience into an interrogation of its validity, and brings into attention how artificial the construct of the sexualized African body is, and indeed, how artificial all notions of African-ness and African identity are. As an artist of Nigerian origins, Shonibare himself has constantly struggled against being confined by limited expectations of what his work *should* be like and what it *should* address, and has stated that sometimes he feels the pressure to conform to a stereotyped notion of "being black". He asserts that while he does not have a problem with his African heritage - stating, "I don't feel that I am location-less or colour-less because, if I do, I am immediately denying myself very fundamental aspects of my on visibility.... I don't subscribe to the notion of anonymity"- he does object to the use of such terms as "Black" and "African" as a means of fixing him.

Shonibare's work seeks, in fact, to encourage a postmodern understanding of identity. For him, personal identity transcends categorization, and hybridity and complexity are the only stable factors in its construction. Rather than consisting of some fixed or essential entity, identity is, in the words of Hynes, an "eclectic, self-mocking, part handmade, part industrial, fantastical thing; a formally ordered yet very personal improvisation, with some elements that are self-chosen and others imposed by stereotypes or the whim of history." (Hynes 2001: 65) Shonibare's work can also be seen to promote Hall's understanding of identity as "an open, complex and unfinished game - always 'under construction... moving into the future by a symbolic detour through the past" (Hall 1991: 19).

It is important to address that Shonibare takes many of his artistic and intellectual cues from one of the most ambiguous and ironic figures to emerge from the Modern age: the Victorian Dandy. While on the one hand, Shonibare critiques this figure for its ridiculous excesses; the legacies of the Dandy resonate strongly in Shonibare's artistic practice. Like the Dandy, who was devoted to a celebration of style, elegance and aesthetic beauty, Shonibare himself is obsessed with fashion and aesthetic beauty. Moreover, his playful and ironic style mirrors that of the Dandy; the countless visual witticisms that can be noted in his work are comparable to the lingual witticisms that Dandies were famous for. More importantly, however, is that much of Shonibare's own conception of identity is modelled on the figure of the Dandy. Indeed, he casts himself as a Dandy in *Diary of A Victorian Dandy* (1998). While ridiculous and flamboyant on the one hand, the Dandy can also be seen as a highly elusive figure that transcends multiple categories of classification, be it class, race and, to an extent, even gender. As Sima Godfrey explains,

“As soon as we attempt to subject him to rigorous rules and constraints, we realize that it is a certain freedom of these - a singular spirit of negation, to use Camus' phrase- that constitutes the essential identity of his nature. The Dandy consciously defies and eludes the convenient labels of definition that modern society uses systematically to categorize its members into objects and functional roles...” (Godfrey 1982: 24)

In these ways, the Dandy, at once a product of the extremes of the Enlightenment act of privileging “knowledge” and “culture”, also pre-empts postmodern self-reflexivity and ambiguity. Shonibare's borrowing from this figure serves as further proof of the complexity of identity construction, and indicates that no essentializing notion of identity can ever serve as an adequate means of representing it.

By interrogating essentializing ideas of the “modern” and the “traditional” and deconstructing these categories, Shonibare is able to highlight how artificial and restrictive they really are. He shows that concepts of history contained within this framework are highly limited, and have resulted in the silencing of numerous historical players and the concealing of powerful forces. Conceptions of identity that framed by this binary and its corollaries are equally as false and restrictive, seeking to impose imaginary characteristics upon distinct cultures and people. Shonibare, on the other hand, encourages his audience to adopt a postmodern understanding of both history and identity; re-imagining it from the margins and seeking to promote an understanding of it within frameworks of complexity, hybridity and a celebratory idea of difference.

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