Comparing Identity and Self-Discovery in Bless Me, Ultima and Homegoing

Posted on October 9, 2018

Narrative Structure Theme and Character Development

A complete story must follow some structure, with one event leading to another with continuity, and have a theme that binds the story and characters together. Organization is crucial to making a comprehensible story. However, the novel “Home Going” has proved it wrong; although it has a theme that binds the overall story, it seems scattered and unorganized. It is not a typical story that flows from one event to another around the protagonist, as in “Bless Me, Ultima.” Bless Me, Ultima follows the traditional style of a novel with a protagonist solving questions related to identity and religion, but Home Going does not have a smooth plot, nor does it have a defined protagonist. However, it ensures the theme of self-discovery and identity, like Bless Me, Ultima. The paper will discuss the plots and characters of the novel at the beginning. Secondly, it will discuss similarities in the plot and characters, showing the emergence of themes. Lastly, the paper will examine differences in the plot and characters that help in the emergence of the theme of the novel, which is self-discovery.

Identity Formation in Bless Me Ultima

Bless Me, Ultima, written by Rudolfo Anaya in 1972, is the story of a boy, Antonio, who lives in New Mexico with his parents and Ultima, who lives with his family and has some spiritual knowledge(Anaya, 1972; National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.). Antonio becomes aware of his surroundings and wants to understand his identity, as his father and mother have different dreams for him. His father wants to travel to California, and his mother wants him to become a priest in a church. He becomes aware of death, which sparks his interest in religion and self-identity early in life. Antonio questions many aspects of Christianity and rituals throughout the novel and learns from Ultima, whom he deeply respects. Tenorio, the barber, who is the antagonist in the novel, kills Ultima at the end, and Antonio understands the two dilemmas in his life. He understands that he is pulled between two contradictory expectations of his mother and father and spirituality and Catholicism. However, he resolves the problem, understanding that he does not need to choose one or the other, but he can try to bring them together. The novel revolves around a seven-year-old boy who tries to form a personal identity without giving in to his parents’ dreams and choosing one or the other.

Generational Identity in Homegoing

In contrast, “Home Going” by Yaa Gyasi does not follow a structured and traditional plot (Gyasi, 2016; National Book Foundation, n.d.). It starts with the story of a woman called Maame who gives birth to two female children, and the story covers seven generations of the two girls, Effia and Esi. Effia and Esi are half-sisters. Effia marries James Collins and remains in Ghana, but Esi is sold into slavery and sent to America. The novel covers the lives of the descendants of the two half-sisters. The current descendants, Marcus and Marjorie, meet in California, and they go back to Ghana. It is an exploration of self-discovery and the history of their family. It is a story of two family members who were separated because of slavery and civil wars in Ghana and in America. Every story of the descendants deals with identity and self-discovery, which adds up to the bigger theme of the novel (Rushdy, 1999; Goyal, 2019).

Characters and Conflict in Bless Me Ultima

In Bless Me Ultima, there are few characters and a protagonist, Antonio, around whom the story revolves. It is his journey to resolve the issue and choose from two options. He is thoughtful and questions morals and religion. Apart from Antonio, Gabriel, Antonio’s father, fancies an adventurous life, traveling to various places, but Maria, Antonio’s mother, observes Catholicism. However, more than his parents, Antonio is close to Ultima, who is an old woman who has spiritual powers. She is calm, understanding, and tolerant. Narciso is a drunken man who is friends with Gabriel. Tenorio is a barber in the nearby saloon who is against Ultima and plots against her. He has three daughters, and they perform black magic. Cico is Antonio’s friend. He is gentle and quiet. Florence is another friend of Antonio’s, and he does not believe in God but performs catechism in the church because of his friends. The characters in Bless Me, Ultima help the protagonist form and build upon his ideologies. They help the protagonist grow and provide a reason to question the religion and morals of the society. For instance, Antonio learns about spirituality from Ultima and religion from his mother, and wandering from his father. The various characters raise questions of morality and social values. The characters ignite the questions of being men and killing a person versus using reason to solve the problem. The killing also ignites the religious question, “Did God listen? Would he hear?” (23). Being surrounded by a friend who is gentle and another who does not believe in God but performs Catechism raises moral as well as religious questions. All of the features of the characters serve the purpose of the story and help in the development of themes of identity, self-discovery, and transition. In this story, Ultima, Florence, Maria, Gabriel, and the barber with his children play a greater role in Antonio’s transition and development of an identity with consciousness and responsibility in his life.

Characters and Historical Change in Homegoing

Similarly, the characters in Homegoing not only keep the story flowing but also contribute to self-

discovery in two distinct places. The various characters show political as well as social transitions through the generations, with each generation facing various identity issues. There are many characters in Homegoing, but every chapter has fewer characters who push the story forward. The characters of the novel, starting with Maame, Effia, Esi, Quey, Ness, James, Kojo, Abena, H, Akua, Willie, Yaw, Sonny, Majorie, and Marcus, build the story and the themes of self-discovery and identity. Effia is a beautiful young woman, and a British man proposes to her due to her beauty. Although she was willing to marry a man from her tribe and her family wanted her to marry a man from their tribe, they could not say no to the British man. The marriage initiates the identity issue as, instead of being a slave sent to Europe, a British man took her as a wife. She is a motherless child but does not know about her identity until she is married and her foster mother is about to die. She is scared to upset her white husband, as he might send her back to her village, where she is unwanted. Likewise, Esi's life with her parents shows that although her parents loved her, she did not have any identity. She struggled to gain Abronoma's friendship, but Abronoma did not accept it. She was fifteen but was unaware of her parents' lives and the existence of her mother. Then, she is enslaved. Her character exists in the presence of others, and she does not have her identity without her father. Although Esi and Effia are two of the important characters, the novel shows problems with their identities, and the problem persists with the descendants. Quey, Effia's son, was educated in England, but when he returned, people asked him questions about whether he was black or British. He could not build a relationship with the villagers or people in England due to his identity. He did not have a close relationship with his father, and his father could not allow him to become friends with Cudjo and his other friends. Fiifi wanted to marry him to Nana Yaa, a village girl, so that he could be a powerful man in the village. He needed to marry to be accepted by the villagers. Ness was punished for refusing to obey or standing against the will of her masters. Although she was a slave, she tried to have her own voice and tried to improve her life with her husband. She tried to escape slavery, where they were subject to their masters. Similarly, her descendant Kojo and Quey's descendant James and others had to face similar identity issues, trying to prove themselves to the people and to be accepted by society. Their journey not only tells their story but also their identities. It shows a need to be accepted in society and to have an identity that is widely accepted without judgment and questions about their African and American history. It was the unsettled identity issue that Marcus wanted to study and learn about his history, and Marjorie had kept the pendant with her for generations. The characters show complex identity formation through various historical and political changes from slavery to freedom and from slave traders to Africans who had been exploited and gained from slavery, for whom the anti-slavery laws were harmful (Rushdy, 1999; Goyal, 2019).

Shared Themes of Identity and Self-Discovery

Although the plots of the stories are distinct from each other, the characters have some similarities in both novels. The characters of both novels are searching for identity and constantly face difficult questions about their identities. In Bless Me, Ultima and Homegoing, the protagonists move the story forward. They introduce the readers to various moral and ethical issues that people ignore in their

daily lives. The characters are critical of their situation and their surroundings, focusing on changing them over the course of the novels. In both novels, the protagonists and other characters draw fine lines between the wrong and right, the desired and undesired. For instance, in Homegoing, the characters from Maame to Marcus all distinguish right from wrong. In both novels, the environment and characters contribute to psychological tension regarding identity and authority. Additionally, in both novels, the characters are strong despite their hardships; they endure, accept, and question, emphasizing changing their lives. For example, Antonio chooses a path where he can combine religion and adventure, and Ness tries to escape slavery and stand up for other people despite being a vulnerable slave.

Differences in Plot and Character Development

However, the plot and characters are different in both novels. In Bless Me Ultima, there are few characters and a simple plot to follow. A single protagonist tries to resolve his issues while transitioning to adolescence. Over the course of the novel, the protagonist resolves his identity issues. Antonio's transition from childhood to adulthood over the course of the novel is a personal struggle for a person who is influenced by a few people in his family and neighborhood. However, in Homegoing, the characters are mostly confusing, as there are many, and each descendant has some new characters. In Homegoing, the characters question the norms, but most of the time, they are not actively trying to change their situation, unlike the characters in Bless Me Ultima. In Homegoing, the characters are passive and not fully engaged with life except for James and Ness, who run from home to change their lives and live their lives according to their choices, but all other characters are passive. In Ultima, the characters are easy to follow, but in Homegoing, the characters are confusing and force the reader to go back and confirm their identities.

Comparative Narrative Structure

Moreover, the plots are distinct from each other in many ways. The plot of Bless Me, Ultima is simple and led by a protagonist. In contrast, the plot of Home Going is chaotic, and every chapter follows its own plot and stands on its own, but the plot of Bless Me continues smoothly from one chapter to another. It is easy to follow and gives the reader a sense of control, but Home Going does not have the traditional plot, and the plots of every chapter are loosely and forcefully connected.

Conclusion on Identity Across the Two Novels

Regardless of the differences and similarities, both novels try to solve identity issues. Bless Me, Ultima covers the tension of a six-year-old boy, which settles within a few years, but Home Going covers hundreds of years of the history of Africans in America and Africans in Africa. The novel highlights the slave trade, women's oppression, identity formation, and social and cultural norms that

contribute to the current identities in Africa and the complex racial divisions and identities during and after slavery in the US. Nonetheless, both of the novels develop complex themes related to self-discovery and identity(National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.; National Book Foundation, n.d.; Rushdy, 1999.). The identity question is a developmental process in childhood and adolescence in Bless Me, Ultima, but it is also a social and political phenomenon of division and discrimination in politics, as presented in Home Going. However, both novels somehow resolve the issue of self-discovery. In Bless Me, Ultima, Antonio resolves his issues and is ready to pave another path for himself, and in Home Going, the two distantly related Marcus and Marjorie meet, and they go back to Ghana, fulfilling the long-awaited wishes of their great-grandmothers Effia and Esi.

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