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IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN SIA FIGIEL'S NOVEL *WHERE WE ONCE BELONGED*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on identity construction and social structures within the Sāmoan community as represented in Sia Figiel's novel *Where We Once Belonged*. I argue that however the post/colonial Sāmoan identity is hybridized, the essence of the individual is still connected to Fa'a Sāmoa - the Sāmoan traditions and ways. However rapid are the colonial vicissitudes, the Sāmoan literature and lifestyle are developed to be a resistance platform. This resistance platform is dedicated not only to expose the colonial impact but also to assist the social and political reconstruction of post/colonial Samoa. To this end, this article studies identity construction, and the challenges that women face within Sāmoan social structures.

Keywords: *identity construction, postcolonial education, Sāmoa, Figiel.*

INTRODUCTION

This article explores female identity articulation within the Sāmoan community as represented in Sia Figiel's novel *Where We Once Belonged*. Figiel is a winner of a Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. I argue that however the postcolonial Sāmoan woman's personality is hybridized, the essence of the individual is still connected to Fa'a Sāmoa, the Sāmoan traditions and ways. I confirm that however rapid are the colonial vicissitudes, Sāmoan literature is developed to be a resistance platform not only to expose the colonial impact but also to assist the social and political reconstruction of postcolonial Sāmoa. To this end, the paper explores the dynamics of identity construction and the social challenges that women face as introduced in Sia Figiel's novel.

Figiel revolutionizes and challenges women's status in her post/colonial community. Growing up in Samoa, Figiel recognizes the Polynesian patriarchy in the colonized Sāmoa; and depicts it in her work as a system exerted on the village. Her target is not to enforce change but to shake the different centers of power in Samoa.

The present article focuses on the ways that Figiel approaches women identity construction and their communal relationships under colonization to demonstrate the misrepresentations of the colonial literature and to establish a native point of view. I will scrutinize women's associations and their social status in a male-dominated culture as represented by Sia Figiel's novel *Where We Once Belonged* (1997). I argue that by overturning the romanticized western vision of Sāmoan and representation of the

history of colonization, Figiel's book is now included in various postcolonial classes in the Pacific academies.

FORCES THAT SPACE IDENTITY

Identity is a dynamic formation processed under social, cultural, political, historical, educational, and gender impacts. Recent research demonstrates the non-fixity and the dynamic nature of identity. These studies confirm the role of social, cultural, and political frameworks that impose on the personality. Identity "has become more of a departure than an endpoint" (Minh-ha 1992, 140). In resilient communities, the process of identity construction draws upon realization of alternatives to the colonial modes of socio-cultural subjugation.

Conceived as a process (Butler, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2001; McLaren, 1995. McRobbie, 1994; Minh-ha, 1992; Rose, 2001; Sarup, 1996), postmodern identity must be forever "assembled" from a "burgeoning supply of troubled identities" (Gubrium & Holstein 2001, 2, 9) milled by normative, rule-governing social categories, e.g., sex, gender, race, and class, (Butler 1999). Accordingly, identity construction is not a fixed process. Identity is affected by political, historical, social, and cultural forces.

Women in my research were born and raised in colonized communities. They are part of the dominated and marginalized people. Women in post/colonial communities are double colonized. the formation of their identities and women. I will focus on the tensions that females have. The effects of battles that Sāmoan women go through in their community are different according to their educational background. Schooling and religious beliefs (failing) social expectations impact the trajectory of identity formation. These factors presume an introduction of cultural impurity (hybridity) necessary to resist the colonial spirit that rules their lives. the struggle to within the community is a struggle for acceptance rather than recognition.

POST/COLONIAL SĀMOAN IDENTITY

Postcolonial Sāmoan individuals develop new strategies that combine the traditional views and the values that suit the new global situation. A Sāmoan's identity construction goes under two forces: the personal and the ethnical belonging. These two forces are in battle and subject to other socio-political and educational factors. Identity is connected, through history, to the community that it belongs to. As David Buckingham puts it "identity also implies a relationship with a

broader collective or social group of some kind” (Buckingham 1). The undeniable relationship between Sāmoans and their communal belonging in one hand and between Sāmoans and the postcolonial poets shapes the national as well as the cultural identity

National identity construction undergoes challenges and changes, which are imposed by the colonial drastic impact on the political, educational, and social systems. Sāmoan individuality is part of a whole system of social and familial relationships. The Sāmoan postcolonial self essentially belongs to a wider range of relationships as well as cosmos. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, a former prime minister of Sāmoa describes himself as : “I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas, and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a ‘tofi’ (an inheritance) with my family, my village, and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging” (Tui Atua 2003, 51). The sense of belonging and connectivity is oriented by colonial and global powers towards social dismantling. Sāmoan society faces different economic, political, educational,

and social challenges. Some of these challenges are represented and dealt with in *Where We Once Belonged*.

VOCATIONALIZATION OF THE MARGINALIZED SUBJECTS

Sāmoan postcolonial literature manifests an affirmation to an alternative discourse to the colonizer’s orientalism, in the Edwardian sense. Globalization and colonization worked towards the marginalization of the Sāmoan. identity representation in postcolonial narratives

The representation of identity in postcolonial narratives give space to the underrepresented marginalized people. frames within the sociopolitical and cultural atmosphere. Michelle Keown brings Albert Wendt’s and Sai Figiel’s narratives and interests into the same line of colonial effects in depicting formally colonized communities. He states, “Like Wendt, Figiel has engaged with the complex effects of colonization, independence, and migration upon the socio-political dynamics of Sāmoan culture, and she shares her compatriot’s interest in existentialism and the corruptions of consumer capitalism” (132). Albert Wendt and Sia Figiel focus on the social, economic, and political changes following the country’s independence and represent the consequences of these consequences on the local indigenous

people (Keown, 38). Figiel, however, faces a communal rejection upon the publication of her novel.

With the publication of *Where We Once Belonged* in 1997, Figielⁱ received severe criticism from her community. There was a rage among Sāmoan representatives for the criticism Sia input to her community. There was a book-burn event in Sāmoa in this book. The old generation reaction is not like the younger ones who find the book one of the funniest books they would read. This intense reaction against this book signifies the importance of the issues represented in the book, although it is a non-fictional book. This communal behavior is part of what Wendt would call passivity or resisting the resistance.

Where We Once Belonged traces the life story of a Sāmoan 13-year-old village girl named Alofa (literary love). Alofa was born and raised in the village of Malaefou (within Polynesian Islands). Malaefou is part of Samoa, which is in the South Pacific Ocean, between Hawai'i and New Zealand. The scope of the novel covers the life and stories of people living in this geographical space, focusing on their political, economic, social, and educational systems under colonization.

RECOGNITION AND ACCEPTANCE

Constructing identity needs, as its underlying process, recognition by members of the community. The Sāmoan community by itself faces colonial and global challenges of economic and political forces. Being recognized by a community that goes under rapid vicissitude is not possible. Thus, Alofa and her mother go under this unrecognition problem. In the opening paragraphs of “The Politics of Recognition,” Charles Taylor reflects on the connection between recognition and identity. Taylor defines identity as “ a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being” (25). He confirms

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others. So, a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.²⁵

Figiel elaborates on the issue of recognition in political and social levels. At the political level, native students and their cultural backgrounds were ultimately misrecognized—a problem that I will elaborate on later in this paper. On the social level, the misrecognition of female characters causes a deformation in the process of identity construction, which leaves women vulnerable to outsider's judgment.

Alofa's source of knowledge comes from other female characters rather than Pisa, the only daughter of Fiakagaka, who fled with Sale. Pisa speculates that being a girl is by itself a curse. She never sings songs for her, never takes care of her. As a female, she gets lessons from, and sometimes only copying her cousins, nurses, and her close friends Moa and Lili. Alofa's mother felt disparate for giving birth to a female baby. Alofa says, "she hates me, I screamed to the world that I was a female...My birth meant her death, and because of it, she refused to name me. I was nameless for the first three months"(152-4). Here, the misrecognition is brought to a deeper level than what Pisa speculated. It is the level of invisibility by not giving her a name. However, the no-name baby is determined to break this cycle of misrecognition. "I'm never gonna be like Pisa when I grown up. I am never

gonna be like Fiakagaka when I grow up. I'll never even look at men. Men don't exist. They won'" (154). The pain is transmitted to Alofa through her mother. Alofa is not embarrassed by Pisa's insults, she just does not want to be hurt physically. Pisa's voice of yelling breaks Alofa's dreams and thoughts, but it is nothing to physical punishment like being beaten up or pulling or shaving hair. Not giving a name and physical and verbal punishment pushes Alofa to approve that she is a good member of the family by avoiding the 'misdeeds' of her friend. These positions and motives that evolved and expressed by Alofa signify the ways that the Sāmoan society builds up a female character. Figiel represents the possibility of an abuse cycle and the loss of respect for women in a colonized society.

Prior to presenting herself to the Sāmoan community, Alofa observed everything around her. These observations affect the process of her personal growth. The process of construction of her personality has many landmarks. Lessons come to Alofa in tough ways that create a landmark in her identity construction. For example, in Siniva's tragic death, Alofa experiences a sense of pain that accumulates her traits towards a full understanding of her world. Alofa acknowledges: "And I die on and on, forgetting Pisa's noise, not hearing Pisa's

noises. I die on until the first ray of dawn... until the first rooster, walking me out of my death”(193). The sense of darkness that foreshadows Alofa’s speculations signifies the social and cultural atmosphere that she experiences with people who carry different worldviews. The point here is more connected to postcolonial inheritances in the Fa'a Sāmoan society that rejects new forms of knowledge and attaches itself to modes of instruction that colonizers implanted in their village.

Alofa’s existence and recognition are reflected in her memories as dreams. Her memories retrospectively extend to her life in Pisa’s womb. One of the main issues reflected in Alofa’s memories is the effect of oppression that her mother experienced. Alofa feels her mother’s rejections even in the pre-birth period: “My mother wants to kill me and eat my eyes. She wants me to be born soon so that she can eat my eyes. She makes me cry...she makes me cry and cry”(194). Her awareness and acceptance of her mother’s hatred give her more freedom to understand and explain the ways her society works, represented by her mother Pisa and other community members. Alofa’s existence before the death of Siniva is rooted in those memories and imagination which are always interrupted by the noise of her mother, Pisa. These fragments from Figiel's story sums up the

collective identity of the Sāmoan community that governs the construction of an individual's identity.

Sāmoan traditional norms governed social practices as it is represented by the form of behavior that the girls supposed to follow in “Tausi’s Rules Section,” section, Alofa listed five ideal rules that shape good girl in the Sāmoan society and girl’s role and:

- Girls should never dry themselves with the same towel that a boy or a man has used
- Girls should try and avoid wearing each other’s panties and bras
- Girls should always volunteer to do housework
- Girls should eavesdropping at all times

Dress yourself good when you’re going to Apia. (36)

The separation of women spheres starts early in childhood. This separation includes material properties. Men’s belongings should be respected and not to be used by girls. The girls are taught to be assertive in doing the household work, including collecting men’s cigarette buds.

This privileged separation of men as well as young boys' freedom. The boys have the freedom to do activities they like in the Apia while the girls are subjected to tough lessons. The quoted list of rules juxtaposes two primary social motivators: the lack of basic needs like a proper dress, are, and Christianity that approaches Sāmoan through colonization. Parents confirm that their children are inside that line of rules. Otherwise, they will be blamed. In Samoa, "the parents in Malaefou were defined by the actions of their kids"(222). For example, everyone criticizes Fiasili when Moa tells Faukafe, a member of a Women's Committee and guardian of girls in the church, "eat shit" for a "girl is not taught because her own mother is not taught"(Ibid). The feeling of shame is another social factor that confirms this line of misrecognition of female characters in the Sāmoan community. According to the story, against these strict rules, women should be humble and not demanding even for basic needs such as proper dressing. In the story Alofa reflects on not having a dress by comforting herself that this is the state of most women in Apia(36). On another occasion, Alofa reflects on Fiafia and Faanoanoa mocking for "bringing leftovers to school and wearing panties' '(41). Alofa is blamed, teased, and evaluated for things forced on her. This issue highlights the

inconsistency and the unreliability of Alofa's community rule. This inconsistency in the community's judging values Alofa's identity building.

The society's values and rules change fast while Alofa is growing. They penetrate the individual's relationships in Samoa. Friendship is bounded by social norms, penetrating further inferiority and separation of those who do not follow the rules. Everything subdues to fa'asamoa. Lili, Alofa's friend, becomes outside Sāmoan society, crossing the red lines separating the assumed good, and the thought bad. A line that must not cross came nearer by other girls. Alofa says: "Lili is known to everyone in malaefou as paumuku. Everyone thinks she sleeps with sailors and Korean fishing men from American Samoa. Everyone thinks ...that she does it with Mr. Brown" (18). The rumors about Lili reach every home in Malaefou and become one of the reasons for Alofa to cut off contact with her.

Lili's repression by society is motivated and increased by rumors about her relationship with the Australian man she is serving. The description of the community reaction to Lili eludes the reduction of personality to only one trait that society dislikes: we are continuously warned of her. Girls are "warned constantly against her ... as if she was a

pest, as she was the animal on one of those typical warning signs” (ibid). Fiafia and Faanoanoa’s mother, though excited for the new TV Alofa’s aiga get, tells Alofa that she has a good influence on her daughters. Still, she must keep away from Lili(41). No one was interested in knowing the father of her son “lizard” because she was not the daughter of faifeau or a chief. Furthermore, she internalized the community’s view that triggered her to miscarry her baby. She asks Alofa and Moa not to disclose the name of the man who wronged her. This indicates another level of insecurity in both personal and social dimensions. Being repressed is an undeniable factor in the articulation of personality of Samoan female subjects.

The social and cultural norms of Samoa lack a deep level of understanding and recognition. Alofa announced that “people are surfaces only that is all. They don't care to look at tables, or under mats, or in a book, or bite a fruit (17). Metaphorically, people’s behavior signifies their identities and individuality in the Apia scale. Social and traditional norms mold Apia scrutiny and evaluation. All people must follow the fa’a Samoa to be privileged;” people prefer to see the tablecloths of other people, that is how they look, how their bodies look, how their clothes look, how their purses look, etc., etc.”(ibid). This way of reckoning

extracts an important part of the Samoan identity. The Samoan community abstracted its people, making no way out of mistakes that women do. It reinforces what it disliked excluding anyone who challenges its norm and rules that mixed with the colonizer's standards and regulations.

The presentation of the Fa’afetai in this novel confirms the Samoan actualities besides its hidden message of women’s subordination. Sugar Shirley or Shirley Girl assumes the role of the in-between cases in Malaefou. In the Samoan community, it is usual to have such a comic character. S/he is permitted to speak to girls because of his sexual orientation. In the section that carries his name, Alofa described his kindness to all girls and his privilege to mock old women and his humor. His death description comes at the end of the section:

No one. No one heard fa'aetai cries for help. When a wave hit him and pulled him towards the reef in the mist of that palolo excitement. His body, all purple, was found the next day on the beach, blown up twice its size. Crabs already living in his mouth.(56)

He amuses people, never abuses, or yells at girls. Compared to Iosue, Fa’afetai is

represented as a harmless character that all people love and lament after death; at least Alofa and other girls respect and bear good memories of him. Siniva death has a different reaction on the part of her community (Figiel 13). However, to the reader her death is represented as an outcome to being unrecognized by her community.

RELIGION AS A FORCE IN SĀMOAN SOCIAL STRUCTURES

During the colonial years, religion was institutionalized and became an active force in the hands of the western powers to Christianity became the center of Sāmoan life. However, Christianity exhibits another burden and agent in shaping women's personalities. The episode of Lili's miscarriage in "She was Sixteen When the Eye of The Water Become Clear," unfolds the part that the servants of God exploit girls. Iosue represents how the Sāmoan version of Christianity works. Iosue lets her bear the shame and pain and never cares for her.

Religion constitutes an important part of man's beliefs, psych, and behavior. In the novel, the presence of God juxtaposes mythology, goddess, and methodological figures. The fall of the image that Alofa bears in mind emerged as a reaction to what Iosue did. Her faith is shaken: "What kind of a god are you? I

hate you. I hate you ... and your equally hopeless son, Jesus Christ, too"(64). The representatives of God have a significant impact on people's faith, tradition, and behavior. Her view in life will be changed; it is as if something is drawing her back to Sāmoan myths. Siniva comes to this notion of the new God earlier.

Goddess Nafanua leads people to war against the destructive power that rule(197) and covers her breast with coconut leaves to "disguise the fact that she is a woman. While the goddess sings "I am a warrior", Alofa sings "I am" (197). This usage of " I am" emphasizes the individuality of her existence and resistance to religion that came(from outside Samoa) with palagi or the colonizer on the one hand. And on the other hand, it shows the women's power and sympathy and her ability to bring change to society.

Christianity, which is brought up by colonization, becomes the center of Apia and Samoa. A woman like Soia, believes that the center of Apia is the catholic cathedral. She lives in Saomoa and does not care for Apia and the sins that are going on there. Religion has an extreme effect and power that builds up people's norms and behavior. It brings restrictions to Sāmoa in the market. Alofa speaks of a red sign saying: " Repent! Repent!/17

Years before the world came to an end..."(80). The schoolgirl says, " Bless the Lord." It is so effective that people prefer it over the place they belong to.

The meeting of colonization and Christianity succinctly presented in the poem "water is life":

Reserve the water in Samoa

Sāmoa was founded in 1962,

*Sāmoa is founded on god.
Efa'avae Sāmoa I le Atua.*

Not the mid. Not the center.

Not the womb of Laueleele.

Not the Tuli, Not the Pili.

Not the conch shell. Not the owl.

Not the Sea. Not the... Not the.

Not the god. Not the' god.

*Sāmoa is founded on the 'not the'
god.*

The *new* god. (Italics mine, 88-9)

This poem, which continues as prose, illustrates Alofa's evaluation of Christianity and what it introduced to her and her community. It is a confession, and a withdrawal of God that she believes does not change people's way of living; rather,

it privileged its representatives with power and force to be served by Sāmoans. The God that she sensed is a "very hungry god-hungrier than the biggest shark"(89); that has great power on her community and others, for he is very big, as she says. Siniva is one of the first protesters to this god; she warns people that the slow death that Christianity brings will kill ourselves slowly. Every day, every day, every Sunday, each prayer to Jesus means a nail in our own coffins"(238); and that everybody is "blinded".by too many Bibles. Blinded by too many cathedrals"(237). However, no one listens to her voice except Alofa. Siniva's views and prophesies about religion and education-which is explored in the next section of this paper- signify a realization to the transformation in post/colonial identities in her community.

A RESILIENCE TO COLONIAL EDUCATION

Colonialists utilizes educational system to control the colonized states and regenerate a new western oriented social structures. They start with schools to impose a colonial educational system which is not related to local realities. This strategic system is manipulated in post/colonial Sāmoan . The educational system as well as the material of learning is shaped after western philosophy and

literature. With imperial expansion and colonialism, knowledge is appropriated by western imperial ideologies. Schools of colonized nations were platforms to naturalize western traditions and marginalized the native in the age of globalization and the post-colonial era. Decolonization of educational institutions aims at reaching a state of social and personal equilibrium. However, assimilated Sāmoan cultural values lead the ways that kids are brought up as well as family expectations (Boon, Lafotanoa, Soo & Vaa, 2006). Learning English through iconic literature is part of the colonial ways of overcontrolling the native mentalities toward a western preference identity construction.

Samoan children, as represented in *Where We Once Belonged*, undergo severe rules that involve learning English. The Samoan language is diminished while English is prioritizing. This issues affected and signifies an important point read poems, and books are written by the colonizer; “one of the terrors attending Saoman high school,” Alofa contemplates, was that “everyone had to speak English” (208). Natural habits for bilingual kids like code-switching are not permitted and may trigger punishment. The children however linked the fear and misery into Samoan light spirit comfort by virtue of communal ethos: “Our sorrow or fear were like

flowers in the morning dew. We sewed our sorrow and fear into ‘ula and offered it to the victim for consolation” (Figiel This sense of sympathy adds another layer of connection and belonging in the Samoan identityⁱⁱ. The power of the colonizer in classrooms reorient the Samoan kids towards the western ways of speaking and behaving.

Unlike the typical Western classes, the class environment suffered a struggle between Sāmoan traditions and blind imitation of the palagi. Samasoni, or the lousy wind as the students would call her, creates fear inside the kids and feels proud of it. She urged Lisi to scratch off colors on her fingernails; and accidentally, the girl cut off her finger. Samasoni reminds Lisi that she is Samoan and that she should “act as a Sāmoan girl” (167). Acting as Sāmoan in a western designed classroom is the point where the postcolonial identity is inclined to withdraw towards one of forces in conflict.

Freedom disappears in such a class as in homes; no one dares to explain or give excuses for not doing the homework; if so, he will pay a high and painful price. She also punished Afi severely for pulling Miss Cunningham’s hair: “she fainted when Mrs. Samasoni whispered something in her ears. When she regained consciousness, she was beaten on the legs

with the metric ruler and sent home with a three-week suspension note"(166). The education system confirms the discrimination of not only the girl's but the whole Sāmoan traditions and culture.

In his essay "Towards a New Oceania," Albert Wendtⁱⁱⁱ figured out some of the important factors of the Pacific education. He says that the colonizer believes that we are inferior, so the school was "devoted to civilizing us, to cutting us away from the roots of our cultures, from what the colonizers viewed as darkness, superstition, barbarism, and savagery"(79). "The Daffodils" episode and the kids' knowledge of what they are forced to memorize signifies the imperial and the colonizer's education that is so different from theirs. Alofa, who was an expert in that poem, is a dancer.

Figiel authored a poem titled after William Wordsworth's poem entitled "The Daffodils- From a Natives Perspective" in her book *To a Young Artist in Contemplation: Poetry and Prose* (1998). Figiel challenges English literature and heritage. She writes "Apologies Mr./Wordsworth,/But I also wandered /Lonely as/ a cloud...when I first heard your/ Little poem/ She pulled

my ear/ Each time I stared / At the auke bush.../Do/ You//Know/ What / I / Mean//Mr./ Words /Worth?/Do you/ Know /What /I mean? Her intention concerns the way they have been introduced to English poets, especially the romantic poets of the 19th century.

The presentation of nature and the motifs in Figiel's writings bear some interest to those who are living in the Pacific. However, the way by which the poems introduced, presented, and enforced onto the Whitefication educational system, to use Wendt words, matters to Figiel as a writer and as an activist. The colonial educational system, Wendt believes, succeeds in reducing "many of us into a state of passivity"(79). This system produces people like Mrs. Samasona. The colonial ideology and Sāmoan tradition weaved together in Mrs. Samasona's personality. It is a circle that resists opening to a better way of life as Wendt puts it "The basic function of education in all cultures is to promote conformity, obedience, and respect. In practice, it has always been our instrument of domesticating females. The typical formal educational process is like a lobotomy operation or relentless life-long

dosage of tranquilizers” (79). However, characters like Siniva represent another layer of the impact of education in postcolonial identities.

Siniva who received different kinds of education in New Zealand resists the imposed colonial culture. She has an MA in history. Her beauty is linked to nature; she has “her hair the length of a river. Eyes the color of lava” (190); however, that all ends upon her return to Apia. Her beauty has gone, her smart thought turned into severe criticism directed at her society. Her mother thought that it was ma'i aiku. Her endeavors bear similarity to Goddess Nafanua, who leads her people against oppression. We are told that she has a deep understanding of myths and legend and that she is assigned to say these messages to kids and make them recognize that they were in the darkness. However, there is also a gap in this mythology and the actualities in her community. Sāmoan treated her harshly and never heard what she was trying to say. She, like tears up the BA certificate, and burned the MY. She tried vainly to get the attention of her community, but they were stacked in one mold.

Siniva reaction to palagis that are walking in the market signifies that the genuine message that only the colonizers would understand. She speaks to them in

English, in their language asking them to go back: “go back to where you come from, you that fucking ghosts! Gauguin is dead! There is no paradise!”(192); while the children mocked and laughed at Siniva, these palagi understood the message, shocked, and confused, ashamed, and looked down. I would classify her as one of the active resistance of colonialism; she tried to prove the darkness and misorientation that it brought to Samoa. She would say: “We are not living in the lightness; lightness died that first day in 1830 when breakers of the sky entered these shores, forcing us all to forget... to forget...to burn our gods... to kill our gods...to redefine everything, recording history in *reverse*” (236, Italics mine).

Siniva's life influences Alofa's mentality. Her unexpected tragic end intrigued Alofa. It exposes a gap in the solid picture of Alofa's understanding of her people. Her deep recognition of Siniva death is presented in her grammar of description that mixes Sāmoan legends and reality: “Siniva dead ... Siniva *agaga* is dad too. Siniva *agaga* exists n no more. " People in her community do not lament or weep as if she is outsider though she bears great love for Malaefou people who called her “ fool” the does not mourn or weep.

Her death signifies the subtext of the novel. It is the call to existence and recognition of the situation that Samoa is put in: “now”... It is our turn to re-evaluate, re-define, re-member, if we dare. For this is darkness. Everyone is living in the darkness, and they do not see it. The message defines itself; it is a call for freedom and breaking the traditions that burden the souls; it is a call for the decolonization of the mind. It is the place where Alofa will wake “towards Malaefou, towards the new gathering place where 'we' once belonged”(Figiel 394).

The ultimate withholding of the colonized community over its members is exposed through a freed female scholar persona of Siniva. Siniva, Alofa's aunt, got her bachelor's and master's degrees in history from New Zealand. Being educated outside her community, she returns with revolutionary thoughts and intellectual insight (Ferguson & Mironesco (2008), 18). Siniva recognizes the colonial change in her community, which she described as the killing of people and their people. She says “Every day, every Sunday. Each prayer to Jesus means a nail in our coffin. Each time we switch something ON (radio, lamps, TV, ignitions . . .) means a nail in our coffin. And agaga [soul] as we once knew it dies in our still biologically functionable bodies, full of junk food . . . darkness-food . . . white-food . . . death

food” (238). The construction of Siniva's character signifies the brutality of the educational system imposed by the western colonizer.

Being educated outside her community provided her with a third eye to recognize the misfortunes that the colonizers brought to her society. Siniva's stories and legends besides her views about colonization influenced Alofa who was already oppressed by her society. She left Alofa a note before her death. In this note she draws Alofa's attention to what the babalagi did to her culture and her views about her community that is now living in darkness (Figiel, 238). Siniva's message signifies the vital and crucial role of education of resisting colonial ways of orienting the trajectory of identity construction of younger generations.

STORYTELLING AS A UNIFYING THEME AND A FACTOR IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Telling stories orally or visually, or by performance has been used to engage communities and to pass knowledge. Oral stories reflect the culture that shape collective and individual's identities and the social relationships of communities. Each community has its own style of storytelling that reflects the cultural diversity of different communities. Figiel highlights the significance of the tradition

of storytelling on the individuals of her society. She states, "stories worth telling...speak not only for our individual sorrows and despair but of our joys and triumphs and of our ability to connect, to be touched, to move, to feel like a community" (234). Figiel utilizes Su'ifefiloi, the Sāmoan traditional oral storytelling. Su'ifefiloi means weaving linking together flowers or leaves to make a garland (Marsden, Peter H.& Geoffrey V. Davis (2004), 197). Applied to literature, Su'ifefiloi refers to recounting the story as several distinct but interconnected narratives flexibly using different literary techniques like mixing prose with poetry and fiction with mythology. Recounting the girls' reaction to Shirly's style reaction "We laughed whenever Sugar Shirley, the fa'afafige, walked around Malaefou with nothing but Tausi's panties and bra stuffed with coconuts. These incidents filled our days with butterflies and grasshoppers" (6). Su'ifefiloi gives the novel its smoothness and fluidity. Su'ifefiloi implies creating a new entity through combining material that retains its individuality.

Applying this tradition to *Where We Once Belonged*, Figiel weaves stories, memories, and imagination to create a new sense of Alofa's sense of individuality. In my Ph.D. dissertation (2019), I referred to a possibility of deforming memory and

imagination as result of colonial interruption on social relationships: "Often the effects of colonization appear as confabulations when a colonized subject processes events she/he/they tackle in their daily life" (Al-shwillay 16). Provoking Su'ifefiloi in Figiel's novel not only confronts this possibility but also stands as resistance to the colonial traditions of writing. As the pages of this article demonstrate, Sāmoan traditions influenced identity construction in terms of collective and individual sense of the word. Alofa compiled stories that she memories or hears or reads or even rummers to build a logic that guides her towards getting herself recognized by her community starting from her family. The final scene of the novel proves the effect of such lore and stories that connect Alofa to her community in the present .

CONCLUSION

The critiques of cognitive and social authorities that construct and reproduce identities highlight some of the left behind entities of existence and struggle for self-assertion. The physicality of bodies emerges as one de facto in the growth and formation of personality in Samoa. This paper discusses the formulation of women's character and the manufacturing of her identity in the

Sāmoan community as it is depicted in Sia Figiel's novel *Where We Once Belonged*.

Dreams and memories bear the key to the novel. The society that Alofa finds herself in makes her find relief in her dreams, where the readers are told of birds, sea, owls, gods, hatred, love, shock, surprise, and the place where the 'I' exists. The assertion of the self and the strength of Alofa, I would link to the courage, the talent, and the peculiarity of Sia Figiel herself. Her novel is full of a genuine expression of women psych that we can compare to Shakespeare's representation of Hamlet's dilemma.

The familial abuse drives the characters towards self-awareness and evaluation. It appears in varied relationships in the text, for instance, mothers- daughters and granddaughter, husbands-wife, cousins, and friendships that involve family interference. Misrecognition is one. The problems lie in the misrecognition of women and girls and their internalizations of inferiority that gives the personality a peculiar color.

Sia Figiel created an alternative image of the Sāmoan life that defies the western, oriental one. Compared to non-fictional work like that of Margret Mead, *Where We Once Belonged* offers a truthful and authentic representation of Sāmoa social structure. The novel signifies how

the colonized communities stick to some fixed essentials that affect the growth of the new generation. Identity construction as a process is subject to various factors including community traditions, educational system, political environment triggered by the colonial powers.

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ⁱ As one of the most prominent Samoan female writers, Figiel, defines herself "primarily as a Pacific Island writer" (Ellis 70). This statement engages Figiel to the postcolonial writers and intellectuals who play a pivotal role in representing colonial aftermath in their states or communities.

ⁱⁱ For information about Samoan " self for the group" please refer to Henderson, A. K. 2016. The I and the We: Individuality, Collectivity, and Samoan Artistic Responses to Cultural Change. *The Contemporary Pacific* 28 (2): 316-345. In this article Henderson studies the two tensions that the Samoan self-moves between.

ⁱⁱⁱ Albert Wendt (b1939-) is a Sāmoan poet and writer and a post/colonial scholar.

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