

Engaging Decolonisation: Migration, Memory and Trauma in Contemporary African Literature

¹AMINU Segun, ²OGUNMOLA Adedamola A. & ³DAHUNSI Kayode F.

^{1,2,3}Department of Languages, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Nigeria.
Corresponding email address: aminusegun549@gmail.com

Abstract

The subject of decolonisation has been engaged by scholars such as Chinweizu (1987) and Ngugi (1986). However, this research centres around the contributions of contemporary African writers by interrogating the subjects of trauma, memory and migration in African literature. It analyses the transition of trauma from the colonial period till now using contemporary literary text. This discourse also examines the issues arising from migration in the writings of migrant writers. Further, the essay elucidates the issue of collective memory in African literature. It probes the effect of colonialism on the lives of Africans and their response to its trauma throughout history. It concludes by identifying the strategies employed by contemporary African writers in their works to decolonise the African mind. e the inherent deficiencies.

Key words: Migration, trauma, memory, decolonisation.

1. Introduction

Colonialism plays a huge role in African history, and to ignore it would mean erasing an integral aspect of the changes that the African character has experienced. Although colonialism has ended in Africa, it is a trauma that the continent would need to recover from fully. This is because colonialism was both a physical, psychological and social process to make the colonised feel inferior, uncivilised, barbaric and uncouth. Colonial masters imposed western tradition on Africans until their identity began to bear evident transformations due to the experience (Ngugi, 1986).

At the heart of colonialism is slavery which was the transportation of individuals for labour. The experience of slavery as depicted by early slave

narratives portrayed the dehumanisation, alienation, suffering and trauma that blacks faced in the Western world. Although Westerners portrayed the initial reality of slavery as favouring the whites, thereby repressing the experience in the memory of blacks, novels such as *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Homegoing* (2016) have amplified the voice of slavery and expressed the transcendence of trauma to the present day.

Many African American intellectuals in the late nineteenth century revived the memory of slavery as a historical blessing in the sense that, even though a trauma, it gave black Americans a positive basis for identity in a world that had revoked the post-slavery promise of full citizenship by the imposition of Jim Crowism in

the South and discrimination in the North (Neil Smelser, 2004).

These writers saw the need to recapture the experiences of slavery, so generations to come would understand the history of African people in America. Slave narrative writers such as Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs have portrayed their first-hand experience of colonialism concerning slavery. However, contemporary writers such as Gyasi (2016) have also documented the collective memory of the African-Americans to expose the evils of colonialism and the effects that it still has in the present day.

Decolonisation deals with the significant change that colonised nations undergo after gaining independence. This context deals with the urgency to dissociate oneself from the structures that colonists have put in place to keep Africans in a subjugated position. It is the process of recovering the lost dignity and self-respect hidden beneath the Europeans' intimidations.

According to Chinweizu (1987), decolonisation requires that writers fulfil their responsibilities to their society by portraying the African cultural beliefs and sensibilities as a thematic preoccupation. The impact of colonialism on the literature in form, language and even content is profound, especially in contemporary writings. Although contemporary writers such as Gyasi (2016), Adichie (2013) and Unigwe (2009) assert their African roots in their writings, they also address cosmopolitan ideals that are alien to the original African narrative.

This is why Achebe (1965) identifies the role of an African novelist to be:

To help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-

abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul.

He believes it is the commitment of the African novelist to restore the sense of pride that was stripped away by colonialism by putting away the stereotypical image of Africa created by European writers. Achebe asserts that Africans can regain their lost identity through education, remembering, and the colonial experience's amplification, including its effects. This way, Africans would juggle their memories by running through their history to reconnect with their roots. Contemporary writers have only collaborated with the early generation to decolonise the African mind by serving as a chronicler of the African experiences. The essence of this commitment is to ensure that Africans heal from their wound first by understanding their past before launching into the future.

Ngugi (1986) clamours for the decolonisation of African literature and identifies the need for the decolonisation of the African mind. The central objective in decolonising the African mind is to overthrow the authority which alien traditions exercise over the Africans. These demands were dismantling the white supremacist beliefs and the structures that uphold them in every area of African life. However, it must be stressed that decolonisation does not mean ignorance of foreign traditions; it simply means denial of their authority and withdrawing of allegiance from them.

The African requires a process that would help get rid of the psychological imprints placed on his

mind by the colonisers. This way, they would live above the experience and free themselves from the white hegemonic force that sought to control them even after independence. However, most African states have not succeeded in this decolonisation as they have embraced neo-colonialist and imperialist authority from the whites (Ngugi, 1986).

Contemporary African writers contribute to the discourse of decolonisation by offering fresh perspectives. They portray novel experiences that have not been properly addressed within African literature by using their works to mirror the occurrences within and outside the continent. They portray the deplorable state of things and how the colonial experience contributed to the situation. To some extent, they had collaborated with writers that came before them and also deviated at some point to address the prevalent issues in their time and generation.

2. The Interplay of Trauma and Migration in African Literature

African countries were thrown into a state of disillusionment after independence. This situation served as a chronicle of corruption, bad leadership and even oppression; this experience has led to the migration of individuals out of the African continent. Migrants are motivated by the perceived belief that opportunities await them outside Africa. They grapple at the sight of a European visa viewing Europe as an escapist world from Africa.

Migration transcends cultural boundaries and various kinds of literature. The migrant experience in Africa has become a central focus of contemporary writers who portray the circumstances surrounding the movement of individuals out of the country and the trauma they face away from home. They amplify the

voice of those in the diaspora and express the peculiarity of the novel experience that they encounter. This experience (Achebe, 1965) also profoundly affects their perception of selfhood and African culture, especially because of colonialism.

Migration comes with its trauma as they are faced with peculiar issues such as racism, identity crisis and even discrimination outside the shores of Africa. Most of them only have access to the most degrading and dangerous jobs where they are grossly underpaid for being immigrants. Trauma exports itself to Europe and takes on a new form for immigrants. Paul White (1995) asserts that migration transforms people and mentalities that occur due to the mixture of various influences and peoples. The African has to face situations that threaten his identity where everything African is considered out of place. However, the reality of the situation is that migration strips the African of a major part of his identity. The immigrant faces a situation where he cannot be fully assimilated into the European structure.

Major distinctive factors such as language, hair and the general African look become a matter of great controversy at migration. This is because of the condescending way Europeans viewed Africa, a notion fuelled by colonialism. They are faced with the reality of Europe as opposed to their imagination of the continent; this experience is met with disappointment because they realise that there are challenges they have to face for the colour of their skin. Tancke (2011) boldly postulates that “migration is an experience that constitutes a fundamental shattering of identity and a threat to selfhood.” Migration causes trauma because these Africans are only left with a memory of Africa, which most even believe to be a threat to their settlement in the new environment, they find themselves.

Furthermore, trauma is a motif in African literature that runs throughout history. Although it was popularised by Caruth (1996), trauma has existed in the African continent before then. The experiences of colonialism, slavery, and identity crisis depict how trauma has affected both the individuals and the continent. The decolonisation of trauma theory was spearheaded by scholars such as Luckhurst (2008), Rothenberg (2008) and Craps (2008). These scholars argue that trauma is a daily experience not tied to Holocaust events; rather, it is experienced repeatedly and continuously. As a result, they insist that trauma must move beyond the Western notion to account for the experiences of the once colonised.

Whereas Gert (2014) defines trauma as “the attempt to trace the numerous shapes of human suffering and our response to that suffering.” African literature is a compendium of events that writers engage in based on their time and perspectives; it portrays the agony Africans faced and their resilience in the face of dehumanising experiences. Scholars identify the need for a proper representation of the African narrative that amplifies the pain Africans went through, especially through slavery and colonialism (Achebe 1965).

The central focus for the decolonisation of the trauma theory is strongly linked with Rothenberg (2008), who asserts that if trauma theory remains “tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind these histories.” In an attempt to fully capture African history away from the hegemonic influence of the whites, even trauma theory has to be decolonised.

Although the initial roots of trauma started in Europe, Sanders (2016) boldly comments that

trauma has been experienced in higher proportions within other continents. Africa is one such continent. As a result, the post-independence occurrences in Africa that produced gross unemployment, poverty, insecurity and depravity have been major reasons for migration.

3. Collective Memory: Remembering the Effects of Colonialism

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4. Collective Memory: Remembering the Effects of Colonialism

By the similar experiences of African countries, especially in terms of colonialism, scholars have identified the necessity of remembering the experiences that bind us together. The process of recollection of events would help Africans learn about their history and retain the stories for the generations to come to access. This preservation process led to the adaptation of various artistic expressions to articulate the African experience,

especially for those in the diaspora. The essence of interrogating this situation is to ensure a higher understanding of African history and personality. Also, one can view the massive impact and suffering under the white colonisers to offer to heal the wounded African soul.

Confino (1997) defines collective memory as “an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it a family or a nation, whose members nonetheless have different interests and motivations.” He identifies the unifying function of collective memory to those who share it even though some distinct factors categorise their experiences. According to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), society is where people acquire their memories. It serves as the major defining factor of what they remember and the ideologies they grow to have. Based on the families, associations, friends and all other relationships that individuals have in their society, their identity and perception about themselves, including their culture, get formed.

Further, Halbwachs (1992)) explains that individuals “preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated.” He agrees with previous scholars on the effect of preserved memories in determining our identity. Contemporary writers have adopted the expressive artistic style of using their novels to preserve the memory of colonialism, slavery and the mass migration of Africans to the Americas. These works of art have served as a major way of redefining the African identity free from the distorted perspective of the colonisers. They have employed the use of characters that went through a reformation in the diaspora to reconnect with their African descent.

4.0 Engaging Migration, Memory and Trauma in Contemporary African Novels

This section views the subject of Migration, Memory and Trauma through Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Americana* (2013). These migrant novels depict the challenges that Africans face that cause them to leave the continent and portray the trauma and fragments of memory in Africa. As contemporary writers, these writers have portrayed the conditions in Africa and the various ways in which the characters respond to their situations.

4.1 Trauma in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*: A Critical Analysis

The interrogation into the colonial experience would be incomplete without capturing slavery and the circumstances surrounding the migration of African-Americans. Yaa Gyasi uses her book *Homegoing* to express their ordeal right from the time of slavery. She captures the racism, identity crisis and the gradual shattering of African identity. Gyasi offers a fresh perspective on the old wars between different factions in what is now called Ghana. However, she commits herself to revealing the weight of the wound, sufferings, and ordeal they faced due to colonialism and how the trauma was transferred across generations. Gyasi shows that trauma did not end with slavery but birthed other forms of oppression against Blacks in the diaspora.

Homegoing addresses the impact of slavery from a transgenerational perspective by portraying the trauma of Africans both in Africa and those in the diaspora. The novel begins with the story of two sisters, Effia and Esi, and it presents the experiences of their generations until the fourth one. The Ghanaian-American writer gives voice to the experience of racial discrimination, colonialism, subjugation and black identity that Africans have experienced. She uses her book of fourteen chapters to depict the trauma of the now African-Americans that is strongly linked with their history.

Gyasi portrays migration in *Homegoing* as a destructive act imposed on Africans. The novelist was able to portray the mass migration of Africans through the transatlantic and the dehumanising acts against them. Effia marries a white husband who prefers to call her “Emily” (24), thereby stripping off a part of her African identity. However, Esi faces a more difficult situation with her English master until she calls her daughter “Ness” (71). The Europeans employed an assimilationist strategy to make Africans ashamed of their cultural heritage.

H's girlfriend, Ethe, voices out her frustration at the system, she says; “[a]in’t just about everything I ever had been taken away from me? My freedom. My family. My body. And now I can’t even own my name?” (175)

Another major portrayal of trauma during slavery was the beatings and whipping that these enslaved people face at the hands of their masters. Esi was flogged regardless of her gender by her master for speaking her native tongue to her daughter, Ness. She had to bear such suffering for being black and speaking her language just because her master was against it. This trauma stripped off a vital part of her identity, especially in her relationship with her daughter. As other characters are portrayed in the following generations, the effect of this stripping of identity is more vivid because these Africans realise that they are not fully African, nor can they be considered American. This puts them in a traumatic situation as they remember only fragments of Africa and fail to be fully accepted into European culture.

Slavery is predominantly seen through the characters of Kojo and H. They both never meet their families and are disassociated from their roots. These individuals are a product of the collective memory of trauma that Africans in the diaspora face. Although H is free from slavery, he is brutally persecuted after being accused of “studyin’ a white woman” (158). The novelist uses the story of H to portray the discrimination blacks face as opposed to their white

counterparts. Even his name is a mere letter that accurately depicts the trauma he faces in defining his identity.

Gyasi collaborated with other writers who have amplified the experience of trauma by offering an unbiased, vivid and heart wrenching narrative about the trauma that African living in America faced. She distinguishes herself by offering some sort of chronicle about their experiences starting from their exodus and the circumstances surrounding it. *Homegoing* serves as a compressed artistic expression of the African-American identity. By identifying the key events that shaped their identity, Gyasi teaches Africans about themselves and reconnects them with the most definitive experiences that should form their perception of themselves.

4.2 Migration in Chimamanda Adichie’s Novels

Migration in Post-independence Africa takes a different form. This time, Africans made a conscious choice and effort to leave their continent because of the sorry state of things. After Africans started to govern their continent, novel issues of mismanagement of funds, embezzlement, and corruption emerged. This created little room for the opportunities available to African people; therefore, they began to seek better options abroad. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie captures the peculiarity of the migrant experience in her novels *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

Americanah revolves around a female immigrant named Ifemelu who migrates to the US to further her studies. This novel captures the quest of an African for better opportunities outside the continent by depicting the diasporic experience of various characters. Colonialism has caused a high level of damage on African soil by affecting individuals' perceptions of themselves. Although racism was prominent in America, even Nigerians

viewed the light-skinned individuals as superior in some sort.

However, Ifemelu, the protagonist, proclaims, “I discovered race in America and it fascinated me” (406). The novel portrays how patients refused to be treated by Aunt Uju and how people assumed that her white boyfriend Curt could not be dating her. I did not think of myself as black, and I only became black when I came to America. When you are black in America, and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. (Chapter 31)

Ifemelu’s experience with Curt is similar to what Akunna in *The Thing Around your Neck* faces with her boyfriend Juan as the waiter assumes they were not a couple. Adichie uses both of her books to address the assumptions and distorted perceptions about Africans. In the diaspora, Africans have become extra conscious of their skin colour, and they have to face the shame that comes with being black. However, Adichie uses Ifemelu to portray the need for Africans to be intimidated and treated as inferior by their white counterparts. Even Akunna in “*The Thing Around Your Neck*” voices her discomfort about the situation to her white boyfriend, but she feels misunderstood.

Despite the clamour for a better life, migrants encounter another trauma in Europe. Most of them are poor and disadvantaged in the diaspora. Aunt Uju in *Americanah* has to relax her natural hair because she would be perceived as unprofessional by keeping it. They begin to speak, dress and even act differently because of their direct contact with European culture. Aunt Uju fakes an American accent that sounds foreign on her lips, but she never truly fits into the system.

Chimamanda also captures the nostalgic feeling immigrants face when they are in America. Chinaza in *The Thing around Your Neck* is taken to her husband, and he tries to strip her of her identity by giving her an English name. Her entire family views leaving the country as a more favourable option than settling in Nigeria. They even go to the extent of arranging a marriage for her even though she doesn't know who she is betrothed to. Even Chinaza’s husband married a white woman to secure his green card; Adichie uses him to portray the length that Africans in America reach to secure their place in the diaspora. Chinaza finds herself in a similar situation when she has to endure an uneventful marriage because of a green card.

Most of these migrants grow into hybrids that have a part of Africa and that of Europe in them. They are faced with a situation where they are unaccepted in the mainstream European community. Their migrant position produces a double trauma where their African identity is also threatened. They face an identity crisis in their contact with European culture.

4.3 Interrogating Memory in Chika Unigwe’s *Black Sisters Street*

Chika Unigwe captures the theme of human trafficking, prostitution and murder in her novel. *Black Sisters Street* tells the story of four women in the diaspora, their struggles and the various factors that led to their migration. Most importantly, the novelist captures the response of these women to the modern-day slavery that they find themselves in. They share their stories to give significance to their lives after Sisi is killed. Joyce, Ama and Efe share the experience of prostitution and how the trade traumatised them.

At first, Chisom viewed migration as an opportunity to flee from unemployment, frustration, and poverty to embrace a life of luxury in Belgium. This character says she dreams of leaving Lagos because she feels no future exists (21). After studying hard in university, Chisom has to deal with two years of joblessness, especially with her parents' high hopes. She got tired of this situation which made her choose a life of prostitution which later led to her death. Chisom even rechristened herself Sisi to forget the memory of her past life. She would go through a baptism of fire and be reborn as Sisi: a stranger yet familiar. Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while, and in her place would be Sisi. She would earn her money by using her punani. And once she hit it big, she would reincarnate as Chisom (42-43)

Out of her desperation, she gets into prostitution despite paying back the ridiculous amount of thirty thousand euros. However, she works endlessly to enrich Madam and Dele to pay off her debts. She soon falls in love and tries to run away, but Segun kills her with a hammer. After Sisi's death, the sisters reconnect with their identity and receive liberation from their trauma. Their collective memory of Africa and the experiences that led to their prostitution are narrated. Joyce narrates how all her family members were killed in Sudan, her life in the refugee camp and how her lover betrayed her. During the attack, Joyce was raped violently, and after six months, she was still bleeding.

“My body does not want me to forget the violation (153). Etched in her memory was the traumatic experience that she had. However, collective memory is seen when other refugees tell their stories. And listen to the woman whose name she could never remember talk about how her fourteen-year-old son was forced to have intercourse with her. A gun at his head. Soldiers

in his ear. “Touch her breasts! Put your penis in her!” (153)

A woman is forced to sleep with her son during this war. She preserves this story by sharing it with other refugees. Some were made sex slaves, and others lost their loved ones in Sudan. Nwigwe offers an account of the war in Sudan and portrays the people's collective memory of the traumatic event. Also, she uses her writing to make other generations aware of the events that happened in the African continent.

Ama also narrates her rape experience from a man she thought was her father. The worst aspect of her traumatic situation is that her mother fails to believe her. Her mother clings to the paedophile merely because he had covered her shame by marrying her even when she had a child. Due to this, Ama is sent away.

Chika Unigwe expresses the ordeals of women both within and outside African society. She captures the issues of rape, prostitution and the general objectification of women. Through her novel, she succeeds in documenting women's experiences and creating awareness about the evils they face, especially through human trafficking. Most importantly, she presents the collaboration with other women to respond to the trauma they face.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary writers draw upon history to explore colonisation in the African continent. Although Ngugi (1986) insists that writing in African languages is a major step towards decolonisation, these contemporary writers have been able to portray their African identity through the technique of code-mixing. As traumatic as colonialism has been to the African continent, it has left some footprints that the continent can never recover from, especially in language use. However, by insisting on speaking

the African way, keeping natural hair, or answering African names, contemporary writers have fairly succeeded in asserting their African identity. Their writings identify various ways to achieve decolonisation and respond to trauma.

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