

Washington University in St. Louis

## Washington University Open Scholarship

---

Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and  
Dissertations

Arts & Sciences

---

Winter 12-15-2014

### A Liberal State of Mind: Formal Reconstructions of Statehood in the Anglophone African Novel

Maya Ganapathy

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds)



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Ganapathy, Maya, "A Liberal State of Mind: Formal Reconstructions of Statehood in the Anglophone African Novel" (2014). *Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 359.  
[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds/359](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/359)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Sciences at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Program in Comparative Literature

Dissertation Examination Committee:

J. Dillon Brown, Chair

Seth Graebner, Co-Chair

Jean Allman

Nancy Berg

Ignacio Infante

Joya Uraizee

A Liberal State of Mind: Formal Reconstructions of Statehood in the Anglophone African Novel

by

Maya Ganapathy

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2014  
St. Louis, Missouri

© 2014, Maya Ganapathy

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iv
Abstract .....	vi
Preface .....	viii
Chapter 1: The Right to Write: Individualism and the Postcolonial Writer in Chinua Achebe’s <i>A Man of the People</i> (1966) and Helon Habila’s <i>Waiting for an Angel</i> (2002).....	1
1.1 Failed Individualism in <i>A Man of the People</i> (1966).....	3
1.2 Making a Case for Individualism in <i>Waiting for an Angel</i> (2002) .....	18
1.3 Romantic Egoism and the Demands of Public Struggle.....	27
1.4 Imprisonment and the Solipsistic Desires of Self.....	35
1.5 The Poet’s Unalienable Right to Self Determination .....	48
Chapter 2: Imagining Global Struggle: The Violence of <i>The Beautiful Ones</i> (1968) in Chris Abani’s <i>Graceland</i> (2004) .....	54
2.1 The Form of Popular Resistance in <i>The Beautiful Ones</i> (1968) and <i>Graceland</i> (2004).....	58
2.2 Temporality and Naturalism in <i>The Beautiful Ones</i> (1968).....	63
2.2.1 Temporality.....	64
2.2.2 Naturalism.....	73
2.3 <i>Graceland</i> (2004) as Naturalist <i>Bildungsroman</i> .....	83
2.3.1 Temporality and Naturalism in <i>Graceland’s</i> Construction of Male Subjectivity.....	84
2.4 Apocalyptic Fantasies: Messianic Struggle, Patriarchal Failure, and Torture.....	99
2.4.1 Redemption and Messianic Struggle .....	100
2.4.2 Patriarchal Failure .....	106
2.4.3 Torture and the State.....	112
2.5 Apocalyptic Fantasies: Messianic Struggle, Patriarchal Failure, and Torture.....	120
Chapter 3: Sidestepping the Political “Graveyard of Creativity”: Polyphony, Metadiegetic Narratives, and Reenvisioning the Nation-State in Chinua Achebe’s <i>Anthills of the Savannah</i> (1987/88), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> (2006), and Aminatta Forna’s <i>The Memory of Love</i> (2010) .....	124
3.1 Creating an Open Path to Reform in <i>Anthills of the Savannah</i> (1987/88) .....	125
3.2 Who Writes the Nation’s Story? Authorship and Politics in <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> (2006) ...	137
3.3 Reinforcing Narrative Accountability: Cross-Cultural Reciprocity and Rebuilding the Nation-State in <i>The Memory of Love</i> (2010) .....	162
3.4 National Belonging and the Middle Class .....	182

Chapter 4: Round and Round We Go Again: The Neoliberal Paradigm in Nuruddin Farah’s <i>Past Imperfect</i> Trilogy .....	187
4.1    The 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Imperial Adventure Novel and the Language of Liberal Reason.....	190
4.2    The Liberal Paradigm in Nuruddin Farah’s <i>Links</i> (2003) .....	201
4.3    Subverting the Liberal Paradigm: Nationalism and Cosmpolitanism in <i>Links</i> (2003).....	209
4.3.1    Nationalism.....	212
4.3.2    Cosmopolitanism .....	216
4.4    Who Pulls the Strings? The State and Individual Subjecthood in <i>Knots</i> (2007) .....	221
4.5    Synthetic Ties and National Regeneration in <i>Crossbones</i> (2011).....	235
Conclusion .....	248
Bibliography .....	267

# Acknowledgments

A mixture of scholarly and personal relationships made this dissertation possible. I would like to thank, in particular, the faculty mentors, committee members, friends, and family who gave their time and support to this project.

The support from my committee members has been invaluable in facilitating my development as a scholar. Joya Uraizee, thank you for your interest in the project. Your encouragement and suggestions, as a scholar of African literature, are truly appreciated. Ignacio Infante, your enthusiasm for the project in its very early stages at the Graduate Student Comparative Literature Symposium encouraged me to further pursue this line of inquiry. Nancy Berg, thank you for your unwavering confidence in my scholarly work and for modeling a type of mentorship I sincerely hope to emulate in relationships with my own students. Jean Allman, your pedagogical expertise has shaped my own approach to stimulating thought and debate in the classroom. Thank you for your kindness and generosity. Seth Graebner, your belief in holding my work to a high standard has pushed me to give my strongest effort to my writing. And, J. Dillon Brown, my principal supervisor, your guidance has motivated me to perform at my highest potential and move past moments of self-doubt. Your questions, always challenging and perceptive, helped me refine my thinking and clarify the larger goals of the dissertation. Thank you for your patience.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their steadfast encouragement, understanding, and sense of humor throughout this process. To my Comparative Literature colleagues, thank you for providing honest and insightful comments in the early stages of the dissertation. To my parents, thank you for inspiring a love of books and learning. To my brother, Uday, thank you for providing a model of intellectual commitment and determination. And, to my

husband, Jason, I would like to express my deepest, if inadequately articulated, gratitude for your unflagging support at every twist and turn of this Ph.D.

Maya Ganapathy

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*December 2014*

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*A Liberal State of Mind: Formal Reconstructions of Statehood in the Contemporary Anglophone African Novel*

by

Maya Ganapathy

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2014

Professor J. Dillon Brown, Chair

Professor Seth Graebner, Co-Chair

While the idea of the nation and national identity is often taken as the starting point for examinations of the African state, this dissertation explores the transnational dimensions of the African novel and the way in which English-language writers from Africa imagine a state that more adequately captures their desire to freely inhabit a global literary marketplace. Although critics of the Anglophone African novel tend to understand the fictional state as an object of unremitting political critique (often simply as a reflection of its real-world counterpart), the African state, when viewed through the methodological lens of narrative form, becomes the distinct site of a global liberal identity grounded in a commitment to individual freedom, unfettered creativity, and humanist notions of progress. The new African novel purposefully allies itself with transnational and individualistic forms of self-identification. Pointing up the formal resonances between an earlier, politically committed, generation of African writers (Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah) and their contemporary counterparts (Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Aminatta Forna, and Nuruddin Farah), I demonstrate that literary form functions as the primary nexus of the latter's engagement with the idea of the state—both how to define it and what it could look like. Although the nation-building work of an earlier generation of writers inflects that of their literary descendants, such textual reciprocity also allows the African novel to foster ways of thinking about writers'



relationship to a global audience and an increasingly migratory authorial identity that is, perhaps surprisingly, in step with the liberatory ideals of an imagined America.

# PREFACE

Anglophone African novels as regionally diverse as Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) attest to the angst and trauma produced by the individual's attempts to negotiate his or her relationship to the worlds of postindependence modernity. The possibility of unrestricted self-making fuel these negotiations. Physical movement, too, in each of these novels (across national, regional, and urban-rural divides) marks the disruption of modernity on the individual's circumstances. For these writers, the individual's desire for self-fulfillment, frequently linked to social and geographical mobility, sits uneasily with the individual's responsibility to his or her community. Whether it is a product of a community's influence, as in *No Longer At Ease*, or the result of individual desire as in *The Promised Land* or *Nervous Conditions*, these novels do not represent the move toward self-betterment within the context of modernity as a sustainable or worthy endeavor. They suggest that sustaining this move necessitates a complete unmooring of the individual from the moral firmament associated with communal belonging in the nation. The psychological guilt associated with each of the protagonists of *No Longer at Ease*, *The Promised Land*, and *Nervous Conditions* highlights the moralistic underpinnings of communal belonging. As Tambu concedes at the end of *Nervous Conditions*, the "suspicion" that she has welcomed the Englishness of her mission education—a commitment to self that "transformed itself into guilt"—is not a suspicion she can easily dismiss although she "burie[s] it deep in [her] subconscious."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, *The Promised Land* portrays the attempt to secure private interests through migration as an ethical wrongdoing that threatens to do away with all forms of stability. The novels figure their protagonists' embrace of modernity as an unwitting collusion with an oppressive and dehumanizing colonial ideology. In *No*

---

<sup>1</sup> Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*, p. 203.

*Longer at Ease*, Obi's education is not a barrier against his own cultural prejudice toward the casteless Clara; in *The Promised Land*, Ochola's thirst for material gain aligns him with land-grabbing colonizers; in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's attempts to gain independence aligns her with the rebellious and volatile Nyasha. These novels show that individualism poses the risk of negating life-affirming or reciprocal bonds of communal solidarity.

In this study, I argue that the realist texts of new African writers participate in a structurally complex process of separating the diasporic intellectual from the context of nationalist subject formation in which his role was originally conceived. I determine how, why, and with what potential repercussions the work of a younger generation of African writers effects a decisive separation of the individual from a collective frame of reference. I demonstrate that the newness of this literature is a result of its efforts to open up a space for unprecedented and unapologetic self-reflection and the articulation of an uncompromising individuality distinct from its communal point of origin. The opening up of this space coincides with the new literature's repudiation of a commitment to the nation-state and, thus, to resolving its problems. This shift has discernible effects on how the new literature conceives of the parameters that constitute the relationship between the individual and the nation-state.

The overarching sense of betrayal that novels like *No Longer at Ease*, *The Promised Land*, and *Nervous Conditions* represent gains its meaning from its relation to a communal point of reference: the shared and none-too-distant experience of colonialism. The anticolonial struggle generated nationalistic sentiment, and decolonization-era thinkers like Frantz Fanon saw literature as a vehicle for inspiring "national consciousness" through physical revolt.<sup>2</sup> The transition between colonial rule

---

<sup>2</sup> See Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* (1959). New York: Grove Press, 2004. Fanon writes, "Whereas the colonized intellectual started out by producing work exclusively with the oppressor in mind—either in order to charm him or to denounce him by using ethnic or subjectivist categories—he gradually switches over to addressing himself to his people. It is only from this point onwards that one can speak of a national literature . . . . This is combat literature in the true sense of the word, in the sense that it calls upon a whole people to join in the struggle for the existence of the

and independence in Africa is widely acknowledged, in Fanonian terms, as a period in which colonial rulers handed over administrative control to the national bourgeoisie who sought to safeguard their own interests by preserving colonial socio-economic structures.<sup>3</sup> A postcolonial literature of disillusionment, which postcolonial critics associate with the phenomenon of “arrested decolonization,” captured the inability of new state leaders to implement a program of structural reform that would reflect the needs of a civilian population.<sup>4</sup> The fading of the Bandung era’s hopes for implementing a political community based on national self-determination and anti-capitalist reform, the successive abuses of dictatorial leadership, and the rise of neoliberalism, which made recourse to structural adjustment programs attractive, contributed to the people’s growing distrust of state power.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the failure of post-independence governments to implement successful political and economic reform influenced an early generation of African scholars and critics who felt that the African novel should house the nation’s memory of colonialism and concretize the attempt to move beyond its destructive effects, especially given that its primary function, they felt, was to capture the nation’s knowledge of collective sociocultural experience.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, despite growing disillusionment, the Anglophone African writer attempted to recast the repeated failure of the nation-state to implement a program of democratic reform in terms of a reinvigorated commitment to articulating new forms of political subjectivity and expression within a stunted nation.

This study traces the efforts of the contemporary Anglophone African novel to reconceive the intellectual’s relationship to a communally defined set of responsibilities, which seem to invariably turn around the problems of the nation-state. The wider sociohistorical context in which

---

nation” (173).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> See Jeyifo, Biodun. “The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory”. *Research in African Literatures*. 21.1 (1990): 33-48.

<sup>5</sup> The Bandung Conference (1955) brought together soon-to-be independent Asian and African states in order to reaffirm a shared commitment to alleviating the politically and economically debilitating effects of colonialism.

<sup>6</sup> See Ibekwe, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980).

this reassessment occurs is linked to the intellectual's present-day location in the global African diaspora and to the crisis of publication that has redefined the composition of the African novel's audience.<sup>7</sup> As Charles Larson observes, an audience once located primarily within the continent has now shifted to the United States and Europe: "Readers of books in Africa are disappearing. Most of them simply can't afford to pay the price, and if books are bought at all, they tend to be textbooks for primary and secondary school courses . . . African societies are becoming 'bookless' societies."<sup>8</sup> Despite these large-scale transformations, critics of the African novel frequently read the work of a younger generation of African writers, whose life experiences are temporally removed from the colonial event, in relation to an older political narrative of cultural resistance and national commitment. For example, in delineating the concerns of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), Dominic Thomas writes that "[the protagonist's] capacity to contest and record the history of a nation struggling in an increasingly oppressive environment is menaced by escalating repression, whereby fiction itself comes to present the only space in which to embark upon a sustained critique of exploitation, extra-judicial proceedings, and authoritarian power."<sup>9</sup> Fiction works to critique and contest political injustices in order to imagine an egalitarian society and sociopolitical reform. It does so because it reflects the problems of the nation. As Sola Afolyan affirms: "The images thrown back by our writers constitute an astute depiction of the cynical political games of the 'power brokers.' . . . African literature [is] a monolithic documentation of African political adventurism and dysfunction

---

<sup>7</sup> See Larson, Charles. "Who Reads African Literature?" in *Palavers of African Literature: Essays in Honor of Bernth Lindfors*. p. 225. The tug-of-war between African literature as literature firmly embedded in the process of developing communal consciousness as opposed to the development of aesthetic and personal identity is played out within the domain of publication and the politicized nature of international literary prizes. See also Attree, Lizzy. "The Caine Prize and African Writing"; Dobrota Pucherová. "'A Continent Learns to Tell its Story at Last': Notes on the Caine Prize"; Bgoya, Walter and Mary Jay. "Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day"; Gail Low. *Publishing the Postcolonial*; and Peter Kalliney's *Commonwealth of Letters*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 225.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, Dominic. *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. p. 236.

as manifested in leadership problems affecting the continent's polity."<sup>10</sup> Politics seem to constitute the central preoccupation of all African literature.

While some critics have drawn attention to the new literature's skepticism toward anticolonial narratives of resistance and nationalism, they too continue to foreground the nation as the primary locus of these novelists' concerns. Here, the realist representation of the nation and its problems comes to stand, unambiguously, as an index of authorial commitment and intent. For example, in a recent essay dealing with the work of new female writers from West Africa, Anne Gagiano observes that this work continues to display a strong emotional, cultural, and political obligation to the nation. She notes that the novels of these writers reflect a renewed critique of the national sphere (a direct and honest engagement with the problems of the past and the present), as well as an affirmation of ongoing national responsibility. For instance, Gagiano straightforwardly links these novelists' use of first-person narration to "an air of authenticity" that lends the representation of their respective nations "a convincing quality, an authority or validity," which is also evinced in the way these writers appear to speak through their characters: "the deep fondness for their people exhibited by the authors through their characters, the irrevocable connectedness felt with their compatriots, lend poignancy to these texts and help to endow them with [an] 'illocutionary force.'"<sup>11</sup> Realism in the African novel, therefore, continues to be thought in terms of national commitment. In a similar vein, Madhu Krishnan, who claims that the new literature has not completely dismissed the idea of the nation-state, suggests that "it is the very co-existence of affiliations and disavowals that creates an expression of nation-ness through multiple ends, logics, and desires that ultimately call for a reinvigorated engagement that looks towards the future and does not force a choice between the individual and the collective in a continuation of African

---

<sup>10</sup> Afolyan, Sola. "African Literature: A Showcase for Africa's Leadership Problems." p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Gagiano, Anne. "Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in Novels by Forna, Atta, and Farah." pp. 60-61.

literature's commitment to the nation in all its contingency."<sup>12</sup> Krishnan suggests that the opposing desires of the new literature exist harmoniously alongside one another, generating a cohesiveness that inspires a renewed responsibility to the nation. This rather open-ended, ambivalent, and flexible balancing of the individual and collective on the one hand, and an optimistic push into the future on the other, however, fails to account for the ways in which the African novel's contradictions may in fact produce a redefinition of national commitment. J. Roger Kurtz alludes to this kind of negotiation when he highlights the intertextual resonances of the new literature: there is an "obvious but understandable anxiety of influence, as the giants of Nigerian literature who preceded them cast long shadows."<sup>13</sup> At the same time, this influence contrasts with the fact that "their stylistic range and thematic concerns are broader."<sup>14</sup> Given that the new literature, as Kurtz suggests, is intertextual in that it considers recent political crises and issues, this dissertation examines how the new African novel, through its formal complexity, redefines the geographical and ideological contexts in which these political subjects were broached by earlier authors.<sup>15</sup>

Assessing the impact of the global diaspora on African cultural production, Kenneth Harrow observes, "[w]e now see an increasing number of major writers and filmmakers living abroad, while still being considered 'African' artists."<sup>16</sup> Speaking of a younger group of African diasporic writers, Ogaga Okuyade notes in his introductory remarks to a special issue of *A Review of International English Literature* that a proliferation of terms are used to describe new African writing, "including emergent generation, third generation, Brenda Cooper's 'new generation,' the new or recent African novel,

---

<sup>12</sup> Krishnan, Madhu. "Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third [sic] Generation African Literature." p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Kurtz, J. Roger. "The Intertextual Imagination in *Purple Hibiscus*." p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 24 and p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> See Harrow, Kenneth. "The Old Chestnut of African Cultural Production" in *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa*. (Ed.) Augustine Agwuele. p. 121.

and the new wave in the African novel.”<sup>17</sup> Their life experiences, as Chris Dunton and Pius Adesanmi follow decolonization and its struggles by several decades. This dissertation explores the novels of a younger group of African writers who are mainly from Nigeria in order to understand how that work negotiates an image of the African writer’s identity vis-à-vis his or her place in the global diaspora: Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love* (2010).<sup>18</sup> While Aminatta Forna is from Sierra Leone, the majority of new African writers are Nigerian.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of Adichie’s literary success, younger writers from Nigeria are garnering attention from local publishers typically inclined to accept the work of more established writers. As Chief N. O. Okereke, the President of Nigeria’s Publishers’ Association observed, “[u]ntil Chimamanda broke out, publishers were far away from young writers.”<sup>20</sup> He also noted that “[y]ounger people are getting more courageous.”<sup>21</sup> This renewed sense of confidence is demonstrated in the turn toward online modes of literary publication, given the decline of independent publishing houses like Farafina Books (known for publishing work by Sefi Atta and Adichie).<sup>22</sup> For example, young Nigerian writers Emmanuel Iduma and Damilola Ajayi established their own online literary magazine, *Saraba*, in order to increase the visibility of their work. Despite its dissolution as a press, however, Farafina Books has spearheaded other non-profit initiatives in the

---

<sup>17</sup> Okuyade, Ogaga. “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent: New Voices in the African Novel.” p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> In a CNN report by Catriona Davies titled “Nigerian Writers Start a New Chapter in Nigerian Literary History (2010),” one of the organizers of the Caine Prize for African Literature, Lizzy Attree, observes that “Nigeria has a rich literary tradition and at certain points it has come particularly to the world’s attention....The first wave was in the 1960s after independence with writers like Chinua Achebe, and then a new wave has emerged in the last few years with the likes of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.”

<sup>19</sup> Some of these authors include Helen Oyeyemi, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, Chika Unigwe, Sefi Atta, Teju Cole, S.A. Afolabi and E.C. Osundu.

<sup>20</sup> Vogel, Saskia. “‘The West is Running Out of Stories,’ Say Africans.” *Publishing Perspectives*. Publishing Perspectives. 28 October 2014. <<http://publishingperspectives.com/2014/10/west-running-stories/>>. 21 November 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See *Farafina Trust*. The Farafina Trust, 2009. <http://farafinatrust.org>. 21 November 2014. The organization’s trustees are Uzodinma Iweala, author of *Beast of No Nation*, Jide Bello, legal practitioner in Lagos, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Muhtar Bakare of Kachifo Limited. Its patrons are Gbolly Balogun, Funmi Iyanda and Louis Edozien.



interest of promoting the work of African writers. Each year, it hosts a creative writing workshop in Lagos with prominent guest writers in order to “improve the craft of Nigerian writers and to encourage published and unpublished writers by bringing different perspectives to the art of storytelling.”<sup>23</sup> The organization also participates in efforts to promote literacy through its Literary Skills Enhancement Programme and its Public Schools Library/Book Programme. The presence of these independent and collaborative networks in the absence of traditional publishing outlets allows for the proliferation of Nigerian literature.

A schematic comparison of two recent novels by the Kenyan political activist and novelist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and the Nigerian literary newcomer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, will highlight the areas in which the new literature diverges from its earlier literary counterparts: politics and form. The political and formal dissimilarity of these novels underlines the distinctly global purview of the new literature. The relative co-presence of *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013) in the African literary stratosphere (Ngũgĩ’s satirical novel was the object of Nobel Prize speculation and appeared on the 2007 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize shortlist while Adichie’s *Americanah* received the 2014 US National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2013 Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for fiction) emphasizes the thematic range of the works that make up the contemporary canon of African literature written in English.<sup>24</sup> Ngũgĩ and Adichie’s work inhabits exclusive niches in the global literary marketplace where both writers have attained a high degree of literary celebrity, not solely because of their literary merit but also because of their extremely vocal personalities. Although Ngũgĩ and Adichie represent different sides of an ongoing debate about the African writers’ relationship to the nation-state, they both critique monologic perspectives about storytelling and language. In “The Danger of a Single Story,” Adichie observes that it is not only the ability to tell the

---

<sup>23</sup> See *Farafina Trust*. The Farafina Trust, 2009. <http://farafinatrust.org>. 21 November 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Born several years after Nigeria won its independence in 1960, Adichie is the most recognizable of a younger generation of African writers given her place in American, British, and African popular culture as well as her visibility in multiple literary circles inside and outside of American universities.

story of another person but also to make it the “definitive” and all-encompassing story of that person that constitutes an individual’s power.<sup>25</sup> Adichie’s desire to combat the essentialism of single-story representations of Africa echoes Ngũgĩ’s desire to undermine the power of the colonizer who exerted his influence through linguistic dominance. Nevertheless, Ngũgĩ insisted on an essential difference between himself and Adichie on *BBC*’s *HARDtalk* in 2013, in which he expressed his commitment to a nation-centric endeavor and claimed that Adichie possesses a distinct set of ideological views. While sidestepping the issue of his own novel’s worldwide circulation through its English translations, Ngũgĩ claims that Adichie is a member of the “metaphysical empire,” which places English at the topmost rung of a linguistic hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> For Ngũgĩ, therefore, Adichie’s statement that “English is mine” contributes to an abstract process of reclaiming one’s identity rather than actually penetrating the power structures of language.<sup>27</sup> Ngũgĩ seems to indicate, therefore, that Adichie has abdicated her duties to national regeneration. While Adichie’s claim about language echoes her mentor, Chinua Achebe, and his insistence that African writers forge their own particular brand of English, how do we understand her claim (as a representative of a younger generation of African writers) in relationship to the staunchly nationalist idea of resistance, which for writers like Ngũgĩ and Achebe is largely a product of their first-hand (and often violent) knowledge of the colonial experience? A comparison of *Wizard of the Crow* and *Americanah* demonstrates that political or cultural resistance, a pervasive and prominent strain in postcolonial criticism of the African novel, loses its usefulness in speaking of the concerns that the new literature

---

<sup>25</sup> Adichie provides several examples including: “Start with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”

<sup>26</sup> In his review of *Wizard of the Crow*, Simon Gikandi raises a question about the novel’s eventual translation into English: “Ultimately *Wizard of the Crow* raises important questions about audiences and cultural geographies. For those readers with access to both the original and translated versions, the question that instantly comes to mind is why Ngũgĩ should have gone out of his way to pen the novel in Gĩkũyũ while knowing full well that its primary readership was going to be in English” (166). He observes that the novel was written first in Gĩkũyũ because of the resources for oral storytelling opened up by the vernacular.

<sup>27</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. African Writes 2012 Lecture.” African Writes/Royal African Society Lecture. London. June 30 2012.

communicates.

Placing *Wizard of the Crow* alongside *Americanah* throws into relief the growing bifurcation within the category of the African novel as political platform. Ngũgĩ's *Wizard* plays out the political function of literature that Onwuchekwa Chinweizu identifies in *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* (1983): "Literature and politics influence each other, and those writers are deluded who, drawing support from the absurd pretensions of art for art's sake, put on the airs of an artistic elect who must keep their works unsullied by the political concerns of their fellow citizens."<sup>28</sup> *Wizard* depicts the antagonistic relationship between the autocratic Ruler of the Free Republic of Abruria, whose paranoia causes him to seek out and quash all signs of resistance, and the titular Wizard who, once mired in poverty, becomes the heroic leader of a grassroots insurrection. The novel advances a critique of the dictatorial state's collusion with neoimperial forces (the World Bank, IMF and America) and its continuous privileging of private over public interests. Storytelling for Ngũgĩ, one critic contends, functions "as an allegory for the mechanisms of naked power and its attendant resistance which have held down his nation for so long" and "a potent engine for renewal."<sup>29</sup> Ngũgĩ's *Wizard* performs a social function when it sets forth a critique of dictatorial power. Moreover, at least in the original Gĩkũyũ version of the novel, Ngũgĩ's use of indigenous African language is itself a self-declared act of counter-hegemonic resistance against the universalizing tendencies of English. For Ngũgĩ, therefore, storytelling should work to reinforce an image of Africa and Africanness that is reflective of a national reality to an African audience. As a "potent engine for renewal," storytelling in *Wizard* also works to restore the collective consciousness of the nation when it celebrates the hope contained in the people's solidarity.<sup>30</sup> As Robert L. Colson observes, *Wizard* highlights the function of storytelling as a form of contesting dictatorial power: "Even as the

---

<sup>28</sup> Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa. *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*. p. 251.

<sup>29</sup> 'Dele Maxwell, Ugwanyi. "Postcolonialism and the Politics of Resistance: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*." p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 238.

Ruler comes to believe in his omnipotence, the narrator presents an account of the *real* history of his rise to power, a story that the Ruler tries to suppress throughout the novel.”<sup>31</sup> Colson illustrates that the formal devices the novel deploys (rumor, prolepsis, and metalepsis) show that the everyday people featured in the novel, and its narrators, are able to critique and counteract the state’s abuse of power. Therefore, in the case of *Wizard of the Crow*, literature appears as a form of communicating political realities, attempting to act as a catalyst for real-world change.

Like *Wizard of the Crow*, *Americanah* also offers a critique of the dysfunctional nature of the African state. For instance, the characters’ desire live abroad seems to illustrate the failure of the state to provide its citizens with basic freedoms and rights. Moreover, to the extent that it displays uneasiness with a Western idea of Africa it, too, in the vein of Ngũgĩ’s cultural resistance, attempts to assert the integrity of African traditions and beliefs. However, *Americanah*, unlike *Wizard*, presents an extended meditation on the individual’s relationship to a foreign nation. *Americanah*, which so vividly evokes the problematic of social belonging from an immigrant perspective, alludes to the existence of new possibilities for the expression of political subjectivity. Representative of new African literature, *Americanah* illustrates that the imagination of alternative and non-native forms of social identification coincides with the elaboration of a non-nationalistic politics. Adichie’s *Americanah* operates as a platform for the author’s views as the novel challenges pervasive beliefs about race, gender, and class within mainstream American society. Richard Warnica observes, for instance, that in detailing the in-between lives of immigrants and emigrants, Adichie creates a novel “about the platforms they have to observe the rest of us, stumbling along, comfortable in our singular realities.”<sup>32</sup> What, therefore, are the “platforms” available to this new generation of diasporic African writers? More significantly, what are the “singular realities” that this literature seeks to tackle

---

<sup>31</sup> Colson, Robert L. “Arresting Time, Resisting Arrest: Narrative Time and the African Dictator *Wizard of the Crow*.” p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Warnica, Richard. “*Americanah* reminds us that every immigrant is an emigrant, too.” *McLean's* 126.24 (2013).

and do they represent the same objects of critique opposed by the likes of Ngũgĩ? For example, although *Americanah* expresses its unease about a certain image of Africa that has currency in the West and portrays immigrants who defiantly cling to various sources of national pride, Adichie's politics seem to transcend time and place: her novel spans continents and generations, demonstrating that African fiction has begun to elaborate and invest in new modes of political affiliation.

*Wizard of the Crow* and *Americanah*, both epic in size and scope, conform to the stark hierarchical division of formal modes that critics use to describe the postcolonial novel's relationship to politics. In a review titled "The Empire Writes Back," Max Magee describes *Wizard of the Crow* as articulating a distinctly revolutionary vision: "*Wizard of the Crow* clears a space within literary postmodernism for African traditions and African characters, and one can only hope Ngũgĩ will use it as a platform for future works that bring his expansive vision to fruition."<sup>33</sup> Magee views *Wizard's* postmodernist critique of the Ruler as a capacious form open to culturally hybrid elements, and which enables an expansive political vision to take shape.<sup>34</sup> Contrastingly, Ian Baucom highlights the breadth of possibilities that the realist genre affords the new African writer. He argues that the realist novel in Africa has demonstrated its flexibility at the hands of Adichie who has breathed new life into the genre: "*Americanah* . . . unites two very different versions of the realist novel: the sweeping historical vision Lukács attributed to the genre in *Studies in European Realism* and the painstaking attention to the details of everyday life described by Ruth Yeazell in her superb 2008 study *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel*."<sup>35</sup> As Baucom notes, Adichie takes painstaking care to

---

<sup>33</sup> Magee, Max. "The Empire Writes Back." *The Millions*. The Millions. 11 March 2006.

<http://www.themillions.com/2006/10/empire-writes-back-by-garth-risk.html>. 21 March 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, to this extent, Ngũgĩ joins the ranks of francophone writers like Sony Labou Tansi, Ahmadou Kourouma and Henri Lopes whose postmodernist narratives dexterously worked to interrogate the stories communicated by petty dictators to acquiescent African nations.

<sup>35</sup> Baucom, Ian. "A Study in African Realism." *Public Books*. Public Books. 1 November 2013.

<http://publicbooks.org/fiction/a-study-in-african-realism>. 7 April 2014.

communicate the details that make up a private realm of experience (such as the domestic and interpersonal) and also adopts a realism intent on delving into the nuances of Nigerian history and the issues which confront it in the present. To this extent, Adichie, for Baucom, builds on Achebe's legacy in that she is engaged with history. However, she also breathes new life into the African realist novel and widens the scope of the history with which it engages. Realism, therefore, charts new territory as it allows the new African writer to address non-political realities.

Although Adichie's *Americanah* engages with Nigerian history, it deals primarily with well-educated, middle-class individuals at pains to identify a place of social stability abroad and within the nation-state. The quest for social mobility occurs, by and large, outside the nation-state and presents itself discursively through issues of gender, class, and race. *Wizard of the Crow*, on the other hand, exhibits its investment in forms of collective autonomy. For instance, while feminism in *Wizard* highlights the leadership of the marginalized, the feminism of *Americanah* suggests a mode of personal assertion. Politics in the new literature reorients itself toward the fate of individuals.

## **Politics and the Anglophone African Novel**

Early critical theorizations of the African novel have most often accorded it meaning and intentionality within a political framework. The critical reception of the African novel reflected a nationalist set of concerns and held up the African novel as a sociopolitical platform from which authors should express a localist set of views. This view of the African novel stems from the coincidence of studies of the African novel with the lead up to political independence in the 1950s and 60s. It originated in what were, given the time in which it first emerged, the social conditions of the African novel's production: the colonial experience and the struggle for political autonomy. Therefore, the use of politics as a lens for understanding the African novel reflects its traditional linkage with a set of concerns that revolve around the nation, its people, and its history. As Fanon would have us understand, the African writer-intellectual's capacity to engage with the nation on a

political level began with stepping off the educational path associated with bourgeois privilege and, instead, enabling the practical expression of this education through the empowerment of a subjugated people.<sup>36</sup> If the writer-intellectual took up arms alongside the people in a collective struggle for recognition, then the index of the African novel's cultural authenticity was its fidelity to representing this struggle. This view also resonated with the mission of the *Bolekaja* school of critics (Chinweizu Ibekwe, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie), who emphasized, against the expectations of Eurocentric literary criticism during the post-independence era, the need for the African novel to incorporate traditional modes of African storytelling (oral forms of literature, drama, and poetry) given that the African novel should develop the sociopolitical consciousness of the people, reflect their lived reality and respond to their needs.<sup>37</sup> The *Bolekaja* critics took the lead in consolidating the primacy of political concerns in analyses of the African novel. Given its Marxist philosophical underpinnings, this school of thought emphasized the purely functional aspects of the African novel as a medium for social and political instruction, empowerment, and change. As Ngũgĩ himself explains in *Decolonising the Mind*, colonialism eroded the individual's knowledge of particular forms of culture and produced detrimental effects like social alienation.<sup>38</sup> Early critics of the African novel privileged a social realist aesthetic that strove to emulate the communal solidarity and cultural authenticity produced by the traditional oral storyteller. The prescribed role of the writer as social and political commentator constituted a reflectionist view of literature, which revolved around the representation of an "African" reality and demonstrated a concern with nation, language, and cultural authenticity.<sup>39</sup> The continued influence of this reflectionist aesthetic is seen in the literature

---

<sup>36</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon writes: "In an underdeveloped country, the imperative duty of an authentic national bourgeoisie is to betray the vocation to which it is destined, to learn from the people, and make available to them the intellectual and technical capital it culled from its time in colonial universities" (99).

<sup>37</sup> See Ibekwe, Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980).

<sup>38</sup> Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

<sup>39</sup> George Olakunle, argues, in *Relocating Agency* that "although the derivativeness of African reflectionist criticism is conceptually limited, it also comes with an indirect profit. First, it enabled Africanist cultural works to put "Africa" at the

that was produced during the post-independence period in which the writer-intellectual sought to antagonistically dismantle and interrogate the political power of newly installed neocolonial governments.

The notion that literature should reflect the material and social conditions of the society in which it is produced continues to exercise its influence on practitioners of postcolonial criticism today. The sustained critical interest in the ways the African novel responds to a state of political crisis means that the focus of such criticism is unavoidably the connection between the work of art and the pragmatic solutions that it elaborates to sustain the political integrity of the nation.

Therefore, the literary critic must work to excavate the African novel's underlying sociopolitical agency given that its true meaning coheres around the way it functions to achieve a certain end.

Nicholas Brown, for example, articulates this principle when he argues that every representation is oriented at a potential future and its realization in such a way that "what we typically call 'representations' are not mere representations but also real interventions in the object" and, as such, are directly engaged in shaping the political realm.<sup>40</sup> Here, the capacity of the postcolonial novel to make a definitive intervention in the political sphere of the nation makes up its most distinguishing feature. Often, the critical emphasis on politics stems from attempts to distinguish it from its Western counterpart. For example, Keith Booker highlights the idea that the African novel "as a whole is more intensively engaged with politics and history than its European counterpart."<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, despite efforts to underline the relative autonomy of the African novel's formal attributes, Joanna Sullivan observes that the African novel "is more epic, more political, more didactic and

---

center of an adventure of human minds contemplating human affairs. Second, it exhibits conceptual problems inherent to Anglo-Saxon literary criticism (101)."

<sup>40</sup> Brown, Nicholas. "African Literature, Modernism and the Problem of Political Subjectivity," p. 265.

<sup>41</sup> See Booker, Keith M. "The African Historical Novel." *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. Abiola Irele. p. 141.



more connected to its literary antecedents than the Western novel.”<sup>42</sup> The African novel works, according to these critics, to fulfill a political and didactic purpose that enables a seemingly continuous ideological narrative.

This perspective continues to influence the way the African novel is taught in the classroom. For instance, in Ode S. Ogede’s review of Guarav Desai’s edited volume, *Teaching the African Novel* (2009), Ogede critiques the longstanding theoretical appeal of approaches that emphasize an understanding of the African novel’s sociopolitical context and the continuity of such approaches between different generations of scholars. Ogede notes in his review that “the question of the African novel as art is never addressed seriously and in any concrete manner anywhere throughout this book. Instead, it is the vibrancy and piquancy of the sociopolitical observations and commentaries made by the authors that give indication that even as the older teachers of African literatures get closer and closer to retirement they should have few worries about the future of the field because they will be bequeathing it into very politically astute hands.”<sup>43</sup> Ogede critiques the belief that readers of the African novel (particularly those who reside in the West) cannot understand its meaning, let alone its stakes, without being exposed to its content through methodologies that place politics at their center. Ogede’s critique also targets several methodological approaches outlined in Desai’s edited collection. For example, Ogede draws attention to Tejumola Olaniyan’s essay on politics and resistance in the African novel. Olaniyan claims that politics is still a unifying thread in a novel like *Nervous Conditions*, which is not overtly concerned with anticolonial resistance as it deals primarily with the everyday in terms of interpersonal relations.<sup>44</sup> Although Olaniyan emphasizes the distinction between the tools enlisted by writers and politicians, he

---

<sup>42</sup> Sullivan, Joanna. “Redefining the Novel in Africa,” p. 187.

<sup>43</sup> Ogede, Ode S. Rev. of *Teaching the African Novel* (2009) by Guarva Desai. *Research in African Literatures* 41.3 (2010). p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> Olaniyan, Tejumola. “Political Critique and Resistance in African Fiction” in *Teaching the African Novel*, ed. Gaurav Desai. p. 80

expresses the idea that even those newer African novels that do not seem overtly political (those operating at a micro level of politics rather than at a macro level, which “involves social relations between and among the state, groups, and individuals”) are likely to enlist “fresh innovations” in service of “the sanctified thematic of political critique.”<sup>45</sup> Teaching, therefore, serves to further embed a vision of African fiction that “is pervasively and obviously macropolitics,” oriented specifically to a “wide-ranging critical, oppositional attitude against powerful individuals and the formal institutions of state they run and the ideas and attitudes that sustain them.”<sup>46</sup> In this review, the African novel’s privileged object of ideological critique is almost always the nation-state.

## Form and the Anglophone African Novel

In line with critiques like Ogede’s, this dissertation prioritizes the form of the African novel as a methodological starting point for understanding its attitudes toward the nation-state.<sup>47</sup> The novels that this dissertation examines are characteristic of a new wave of African realist fiction. Traditionally, postcolonial literary studies links realism to a simplistic form of nationalism. Anthony Appiah identifies Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as representative of realist aesthetics in the African novel.<sup>48</sup> He notes that *Things Fall Apart* took on the task of recuperating, through a realist mode of narration, an African or non-Eurocentric perspective of the nation’s pre-colonial past.<sup>49</sup> The novel valorizes an African world-view and makes a claim for the significance of African cultural knowledge as it painstakingly foregrounds Igbo traditions and beliefs. *Things Fall Apart*,

---

<sup>45</sup> Olaniyan, Tejumola. “Political Critique and Resistance in African Fiction” in *Teaching the African Novel*, ed. Gaurav Desai. p. 71 and p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> See Andrade, Susan. Z. “Realism, Reception, 1968, and West Africa.” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 289-308 and Gikandi, Simon. *Reading the African Novel*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post - in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 336 -57.

<sup>49</sup> See Irele, F. Abiola. “The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” *African Studies Quarterly* 4, 3 (2000): 1-40; Obiechina, Emmanuel. “Structure and Significance in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” *English in Africa* 2.2. (1975): 38-44; and Korang, Kwaku Larbi. “Making a Post-Eurocentric Humanity: Tragedy, Realism, and *Things Fall Apart*.” *Research in African Languages* 42.2 (2011): 1-29.

therefore, played an instrumental role in proclaiming the existence and complexity of an African past. In doing so, the African realist novel fashioned in the spirit of Achebe's *Things* aligned itself with the work of reconsolidating the nation's memory of a rich cultural past. This narrative of a complex national history became the basis from which leaders at the forefront of the movement for national independence could galvanize popular support against colonial rule. However, as Anthony Appiah observes, the same nationalism also enabled a generation of corrupt African leaders to enact their own brand of dehumanizing violence upon the nation. Appiah suggests that this simple and reductive nationalism, which was rooted in the romanticization or nostalgic recounting of an African past, was cast aside because of the state's failure to galvanize change through this nationalist narrative. This failure, according to Appiah, brought about the rise of the post-realist novel as a critique to the simplistic form of nation-building associated with a corrupt nation-state. Appiah's generational approach highlights an evolution of the realist novel toward a more critical representation of a nationalism cloaked in the hierarchical terms of colonial ideology.<sup>50</sup> The post-realist or postmodern novel, therefore, is typically associated with a more efficacious critique of postcolonial despotism and, hence, a more insightful understanding of the state.

Echoing Appiah's suggestion that postmodernism offered the postcolonial writer a more complex means of rendering political realities, critical evaluations of new African writing in English tend to associate it with one of two formal tendencies: realism or postmodernist experimentalism. Adélékè Adéèkó, for example, claims that in the new novels, "the narratives are straightforwardly realist, virtuoso displays of textual self-reflexivity are minimal, and the commonest intertextual references invoke Chinua Achebe's sedate *Things Fall Apart* and not Amos Tutuola's wild *The Palm-*

---

<sup>50</sup> Susan Andrade writes in "Realism, Reception, 1968, and West Africa" that "Appiah's object of critique is not *realist literature* as much as it is *nationalist sentiment*. He links the two but is far more interested in theme than in form. He rejects what some call imagined communities; he prefers a novel that depicts no community or collectivity between various groups of subjugated people but instead represents human relations as shaped primarily by the individual will to power (298)."

*Wine Drinkard*.”<sup>51</sup> Here, realism seems to indicate minimal innovation on the part of the new writing. Jane Bryce sees Nigerian women writers as a group whose preference for realism is accompanied by their desire to claim a space for new concerns. Despite her attention to the literature’s divergent themes, Bryce does not link these new concerns to formal innovation noting that they “us[e] the terms and techniques of preceding generations while calling into question their interpretation of the past.”<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, critics who label the African novel postmodern in outlook understand it as forging a clear departure from a “simple” realism that engages with a recognizable reality. For example, Stephanie Newell suggests that the critical reception of Third Generation writing is best understood according to its departure from a realist, anti-colonial, and political mode of narration.<sup>53</sup> Critics therefore seem to reinforce the realist-postmodernist rubric associated most visibly with Anthony Appiah, which equates realism with a certain degree of simplicity. As Susan Andrade explains, postcolonial and African literary critics, like their modernist counterparts, are inclined to reject realism as a viable mode of addressing the difficulties of life in the postcolony because of realism’s association with ethnography as well as the perception that postmodernism allows for a more nuanced and effective political critique.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the valorization of a postmodernist or experimental aesthetic framework tends to discount the complexity of the realist mode as a viable platform from which to advance dissenting political perspectives. In accounting for the difference represented by this work and the work of an earlier generation of Nigerian writers, Dunton and Adesanmi claim that these new writers were “born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and

---

<sup>51</sup> Adéèkó, Adélékè. “Power Shift: America in the new Nigerian Imagination”. *The Global South* 2.2 (2008). p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Bryce, Jane. “Half and Half Children”: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel.” *Research in African Literatures* 39.2 (2008). p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> See Shih, Shu-Mei. “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition.” This break with realism seems to take on the form of an evolutionary progression, which calls up Shu-Mei Shih’s critique of a mode of literary analysis that implicitly accords value based on conformity to an existing ideal: “Belated sameness is seen as proof of the universal validity of the self, precedent, or the majority. . . . When texts from these literatures are granted an au courant designation such as postmodernism, the assumption is either that the Third World has finally arrived or that postmodernism is a universal advanced category” (25).

<sup>54</sup> See Andrade, Susan, “Representing Slums and Home: Chris Abani’s *Graceland*” in James, David. *The Legacies of Modernism*, p. 225.

the postmodern.”<sup>55</sup> This periodization of the new literature suggests that these texts should be accorded meaning from within a deconstructive framework. Indeed, while Ali Erritouni rightly claims that third-generation novels like Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* eschew a dogmatic insistence on revolutionary struggle, he asserts that their work adheres to “the deconstructive penchant of postmodernism” in order to set forth a larger critique of all-encompassing metanarratives.<sup>56</sup> This critical tendency to overlook realism as a viable mode of political critique fails to account for the ways it ushers in an individualistic set of concerns.

Drawing attention to the African novel’s formal complexity from a narratological standpoint can help illuminate the imagined contours of the nation-state. This approach reaffirms the centrality of form in the African novel’s engagement with a politics that is not tethered to the nation-state. In other words, it emphasizes that form is an indispensable mediator in what might otherwise be conceived as the African novel’s unmediated reflection of political conditions in the real world. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Frederic Jameson expresses the belief that the seemingly hidden social contradictions of a cultural text may be apprehended through a reading of its formal elements; he relates the ideological beliefs expressed on the surface of a text to the deeper, unresolved social narratives buried in its structural dimensions. Indeed, as Simon Gikandi observes of *Wizard of the Crow*, the outwardly epic form of the novel belies its inability to advance a transcendental meaning, as its fragmented and incomplete aspects demonstrate that the “epic of modern life can no longer fulfill the utopian impulse that informs the novel as a genre.”<sup>57</sup> One of the outcomes of treating the African novel’s relationship to politics as formally mediated (through genre conventions and intertextual forms, for instance) is that we can also account for the ways in which the novel constructs the relationship of the individual to his external reality. In doing so, we are able to view

---

<sup>55</sup> Dunton, Chris and Pius Adesanmi. “Third Generation Nigerian Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations.” p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Erritouni, Ali. “Postcolonial Despotism from a Postmodern Standpoint: Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*.” p. 145.

<sup>57</sup> Gikandi, Simon. “The Postcolonial Wizard: *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o” (Review). p. 169.

the African novel as a container for personal or private experience and identify the ways in which such experiences complement or contradict the ideas and beliefs that define the political sphere. This approach also allows us to gauge the relationship of the new literature to the work of an older generation of African writers. The new literature refracts the ideological concerns of its literary forebears, illuminating the contradictions that attend its subversive entry into a global terrain of literary production. This refraction, visible on the level of form, prioritizes an image of the state that not only guarantees but also encourages the pursuit of individualistic interests.

In order to illustrate the self-consciously individualistic concerns of the new African novel, my first chapter explores the peculiar continuities between Chinua Achebe's satirical representation of the intellectual's relation with the postcolonial state in *A Man of the People* (1966) and Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002). It shows that *Waiting*, in order to build a case for individualism, values the need for self-preservation over the possibilities for change associated with revolutionary struggle. Elucidating the structural resonances between *Waiting*'s "Afterword" and its first-person narrator, I show that the intellectual's desire for individualism causes him to conflate his own imprisonment with a public and communal struggle for freedom. *Waiting* privileges an increasingly solipsistic vision of individualism that privileges literary recognition and the attainment of private success.

Although the contemporary African novel stakes its claim to a liberal narrative of self-determination, it also continues to elicit the ideological imperatives characteristic of traditional narratives of communal struggle. In order to explore the ideological ramifications of a newly valorized individualism in relation to a received belief in the intellectual's social responsibility, my second chapter examines the implications of reproducing a historically and formally bound narrative of national struggle in Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004). Starting with a demonstration of the naturalist features and temporal structure of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), I go

on to claim that *Graceland's* present-day reproduction of this narrative of disillusionment creates an “excess violence” that is unmotivated by the plot but nevertheless works to enable the protagonist’s global mobility. In order to demonstrate how the contemporary African novel uses form to preserve the illusion of political commitment, I examine how the protagonist’s implication in the violence that affects the nation produces a structural reordering and manipulation of narrative time in order to realign him with the victimized nation.

The third chapter of this study demonstrates the inability of the new African novel to realize a vision of social inclusivity that takes its cue from Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987/8), which links political reform to dialogue among members of disparate social classes. Echoing Achebe’s vision of national inclusivity in *Anthills*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love* (2010) seem to reflect a spirit of democratic inclusivity by extending the role of national storyteller to peripheral voices and, therefore, grant the possibility of rehabilitating the state. The novels’ formal restriction of authorship, however, reinforces their inability to look beyond the leadership of the middle-class elite. This chapter shows that insular notions of middle class belonging circumscribe the novels’ seemingly progressive representation of communal inclusivity, in which the people are able to influence the course and conditions of their existence. This insularity highlights the African novel’s recognition of the insurmountable political difficulties that the nation-state faces and its increasing self-preoccupation.

As a counterpoint to the individualistic perspective that the new literature enacts, my final chapter examines the politico-ethical approach of the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah to the role of diasporic citizens in the nation-state, an approach which foregrounds a potential reconciliation between individual and communal needs. Farah’s repeated use of the tropes of the imperial adventure novel in his *Past Imperfect* trilogy aligns his characters with the neocolonial and allows him to cultivate the ambiguity of the diasporic citizen’s claims with respect to the rehabilitation of the

Somali state. This ambiguity does not foreclose the possibility of political renewal but reaffirms the lingering relevance of the state with respect to the welfare of individuals. I argue, however, that Farah's *Crossbones* is unable to sustain a realistic view of the diasporic actor's relationship to the state in which self-interest galvanizes social progress. This chapter shows that the intellectual's engagement with the nation-state raises the spectre of opportunistic self-advancement, in which an endlessly reproducible and commodifiable image of state failure upends the global citizen's productive engagement with the nation-state.

In moving away from a political paradigm that is tied to national realities, this dissertation attributes a global and individualistic consciousness to new African literature. As Larson's stark assessment of the decline in readership of the African novel from the continent suggests, the African novel has had to adapt to the unevenness of economic development in the present. This has meant, most significantly, engaging readers from vastly different cultures; in no uncertain terms, the continued existence of the African novel is connected to its marketability in the West. This process of adaptation redirects the original ideological claims of the African novel and may be linked, as the comments of Nigerian writer Helon Habila suggest, to a desire to deemphasize the traditional goal of educating that is ascribed to "serious" literature.<sup>58</sup> Habila, for instance, argues that the African crime novel would engage with current sociopolitical issues while offering an alternative to the popular Nollywood film or foreign detective novel. Speaking of his recent engagement with the genre of the crime and detective novel, through the creation of a local publishing house (Cordite Books) dedicated to the publication of African crime novels as well as his own artistic endeavors, Habila gestures at a potential reconciliation of entertainment with the expression of an "African zeitgeist" that has as its social goal the restoration of communal peace and justice.<sup>59</sup> The genre of

---

<sup>58</sup> Habila, Helon. "Crime Fiction and the African Zeitgeist—A Brittle Paper Interview with Helon Habila on His Crime Writing Project (2013)." Interview Ainehi Edo. *Brittle Paper*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*



crime fiction, for Habila, has much to say about the current state of life in Africa: “By starting an African crime imprint we are trying to open up the discussion, to bring it down from the Ivory Tower to the streets, where real people live, where most new trends and ideas begin. We want to ask questions like: what is the state of crime, and justice, and punishment, in Africa today?”<sup>60</sup> Habila’s allusion to the democratic underpinnings of the popular literary form, however, must be placed within the larger context of the international spread of detective novels from developing countries (and, here, we might also consider the spread of dictator novels like *Wizard of the Crow* across the globe). An article in the *Wall Street Journal* observes that “U.S. publishers are combing the globe for the next big foreign crime novel. While major publishing houses have long avoided works in translation, many are now courting international literary agents, commissioning sample translations, tracking best-seller lists overseas and pouncing on writers who win literary prizes in Europe and Asia.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the division between sociopolitical education and literary entertainment (e.g. the novel as a form of instruction as opposed to a form of pleasure) that Habila’s work purportedly seeks to bridge illuminates the ways in which the new African novel attempts to reconcile its inherited ideological content with a globally inspired drive toward bourgeois-capitalist sensibilities characteristic of the novel itself. As Habila himself indicates: “We are starting with the assumption that our primary reader, our primary market is African. We have a burgeoning middle class, we are more educated than we have ever been in history, the whole world is cottoning on to that.”<sup>62</sup> Here, Habila points to the African novel’s attempts to speak, simultaneously, to an imagined local readership (the potential subjects of a modernizing enterprise) at the same time that it operates within a global literary marketplace.

This study shows that the new African novel prioritizes an inward-looking vision of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Habila, Helon. “Crime Fiction and the African Zeitgeist.”

<sup>61</sup> Alter, Alexandra. “Fiction’s Global Crime Wave (2010),” *The Wall Street Journal*. The Wall Street Journal. 1 July 2010. Web. 18 November 2014.

<sup>62</sup> “Crime Fiction and the African Zeitgeist.”

individual although it seems to aspire to the goal of communal self-making. The new literature distances itself from the nation-state in order to redefine a vision of freedom and success that has, traditionally, been formulated from below. The self, as conceived in relation to others, becomes a self also defined by its material orbit. The new literature's attempt to assert this privilege is evident in its self-conscious inscription of liberal values through a formally mediated dialogue with older and ideologically dissimilar literary works. In this formal dialogue the new literature upholds the legitimacy of a private creative enterprise grounded in hard work, independence, accumulation, and writerly ingenuity. The African writer uses the realist novel in order to assert, in surreptitious ways, an individualistic image of himself.

# Chapter 1: The Right to Write: Individualism and the Postcolonial Writer in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002)

The first novel by Helon Habila, who is commonly identified as a third generation Nigerian writer, illuminates a paradigmatic instance of the new African writing's attempt to reconcile the traditional role of the committed intellectual in post-independence Africa with an identity that is, today, inescapably tied to a global milieu.<sup>1</sup> The need to resolve the injustices wrought by a corrupt African state impels the post-independence novel's narrative of commitment. Therefore, Chinua Achebe's satirical representation of the intellectual's fraught relation to the state in *A Man of the People*—emblematic of the malaise that followed on the heels of independence—will provide the counterpoint to my analysis of the intellectual as he appears in Habila's *Waiting for An Angel* (2002).<sup>2</sup> *A Man of the People* is told from the first-person perspective of Odili Samalu, a young intellectual who crosses paths with his former grammar school teacher, Mr. Nanga. Mr. Nanga, he discovers, has climbed the ranks of the political world to become Chief Nanga and the Minister of Culture in the unnamed country of the novel. While Odili initially looks up to Nanga as a mentor, the friendly rapport between the two men devolves into a heated feud for political power that highlights the inauthenticity and shallowness of Odili's commitment to the nation. Canonical within literature of

---

<sup>1</sup> See "Third Generation Nigerian Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations." Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton write that Third Generation writing is "produced exclusively by writers born after 1960 and thus excised from personal life history of colonialism as event" (15).

<sup>2</sup> *Waiting for an Angel* won the Commonwealth First Book Prize and the Caine Prize for African writing. Habila was the first awardee of the Chinua Achebe fellowship at Bard College in New York. He held the fellowship between 2005 and 2006. Habila's interview with the late Nigerian author was published in *The Africa Report* and *Sable Lit Mag* in 2007.

the so-called first generation, *A Man of the People's* representation of the relationship between the intellectual and state is the locus of the novel's critique of the intellectual's individualistic attempts to forge an autonomous social identity.

*Waiting for an Angel* depicts the tragic life of Lomba, a Lagosian poet-journalist who is imprisoned by state authorities on his way to cover an anti-government rally that he has promised to attend. *Waiting for an Angel* details the impoverished nature of life under military rule and Lomba's uneasiness towards the demands of social struggle. Although the novel itself chooses not to specify when the events in the story take place, the Afterword makes clear reference to Sani Abacha's rule of Nigeria in the 1990s. The novel also delves into the curious relationship that Lomba develops with the prison's superintendent (a minor cog in the machine of state power) who grants Lomba access to paper and writing utensils in exchange for Lomba's love poems, which he passes off as his own in order to impress a female admirer. In this chapter, I explore how *Waiting* reverses Achebe's story of failed individualism. Habila's *Waiting* works to naturalize the desire for self-determination that undergirds the intellectual's present-day creative enterprise. In order to build a case for individualism, it suggests that the need for self-preservation far outweighs the possibilities for change associated with revolutionary struggle. The novel's representation of the limits of revolutionary struggle attempts to stress the value of individualism by emphasizing a commitment to self within the context of political upheaval. However, the novel is unable to separate a notion of the creative self from the demands of social action. The intellectual's desire for individualism causes him to conflate his own imprisonment with a public and communal struggle. Instead of relegating the desire for a liberated creative self to an ongoing national struggle, *Waiting* gives way to an increasingly solipsistic vision of individualism that finds its only outlet in the intellectual's relationship with Muftau, an appendage of the state. Muftau's recognition of Lomba gestures at the

intellectual's capacity to dictate the terms of his own creative enterprise: to place himself at the center of a literary project whose purview extends beyond the sphere of social commitment and, ultimately, the nation.

## **1.1 Failed Individualism in *A Man of the People* (1966)**

The intellectual's relationship with the state in *A Man of the People* reflects the novel's critique of Odili's individualism. Achebe draws attention to Odili's desire for individualistic recognition through his weak rapport with his father. In the novel, Odili is unable to identify with his father, Hezekiah, a village politician and a former colonial District Interpreter whose wealth and power made him the subject of widespread contempt. Odili's father does not recognize his son's particular conception of success and believes Odili, a teacher, should seek out more practical pursuits instead of wasting his time accumulating educational credentials. Once an unknown member of the People's Organization Party, Chief Nanga moves up the ranks of government through his opportunistic denouncement of the intellectual class, who become the government's scapegoats during a financial crisis. Odili meets the corrupt but popular politician when Nanga visits the school where Odili, his former student, is now a teacher. In contrast to his father, Chief Nanga seems to recognize Odili as an individual when he offers to help him obtain a scholarship to study abroad in Europe and welcomes him into his social circle. The Minister's gesture towards inclusiveness bolsters Odili's confidence. However, when Nanga casually seduces Odili's girlfriend, Elsie, the novel highlights Odili's false sense of control. The novel's emphasis on Odili's derailed plan to bed Elsie suggests that he is not able to act freely upon his personal desires. Nanga's manipulation of Odili triggers his quest to oust Nanga from his political post and win over Nanga's intended wife, Edna, who is meant to perform the hostess-related duties that his first wife is unable to fulfill. The novel suggests that

the success of his plan to undermine Nanga's power is linked to the need to validate, once again, the autonomy of his individualistic claims. In drawing attention to Odili's inability to perform a competitive form of patriarchal masculinity, *A Man of the People* presents the satirized failure of the intellectual's quest for individualism and, in doing so, condemns the intellectual's self-interest in light of his responsibility to the nation.

*A Man of the People* foregrounds Odili's inability to obtain recognition from his father, the local chairman of the People's Opposition Party. Odili, whose mother died giving birth to him, recalls the lack of attention he received from his father as a child: "[H]e had too many other wives and children to take any special notice of me."<sup>3</sup> Odili suggests that this lack of acceptance, because of his mother's death, extended to the wider village community: "This meant in the eyes of my people that I was an unlucky child, if not a downright wicked and evil one. Not that my father ever said so openly."<sup>4</sup> The uneasy relationship between Odili and his father is shaped by perceived slights. His father never actually expresses his agreement with the village community's beliefs and Odili notes that his father never tolerated favoritism in terms of his wives' treatment of children who were not their own. Despite these indications, Odili emphasizes his father's lack of affection. In Odili's earlier reflection about his houseboy's enthusiastic purchase of gifts for his family, he expresses his envy because giving things to his own father "was like pouring a little water into a dried-up well."<sup>5</sup> This indicates that, in Odili's eyes, Hezekiah does not appreciate what he has to offer. Odili also claims that his father lives beyond his means, continuing to take on more wives and father more children than he can reasonably maintain on his pension and, therefore, not properly providing for his existing family. Odili does not, however, feel the same disdain for Chief Nanga's opulent estate.

---

<sup>3</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

“[H]ypnotized by the luxury of the great suite assigned to [him],” Odili argues that man’s “basic nature” would prevent him from “giv[ing] [‘opulence’] up and [returning] to his original state.”<sup>6</sup> In doing so, Odili naturalizes a desire for upward mobility within the terms of patriarchal entitlement given that no man, in his right mind, would be foolish enough to squander this opportunity. Odili’s disdain for the anonymity that attends his belonging to a large traditional family (five wives and thirty-five children) is contrasted with the modern image Odili presents of Chief Nanga’s compact and “well kept” nuclear family.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the lack of fatherly recognition that Odili experiences is juxtaposed with the paternal undertones of Chief Nanga’s “excited welcoming” of Odili and Mrs. Nanga’s “almost matronly” eagerness to please: “She showed me to the Guest’s Suite and practically ordered me to have a bath while she got some food ready.”<sup>8</sup> The contrast that Odili sets up between his rural upbringing and the vision of plenty that is Nanga’s home in the city underscores Odili’s desire to part ways with his father’s patriarchal authority. Although Hezekiah and Nanga both hold positions of power within their respective communities, Nanga’s patriarchal authority excites Odili because it operates through charismatic, glamorous, and dynamic displays of power.

Although Odili is at loggerheads with his father about what constitutes a viable future, he dismisses the possibility that he may have misunderstood his father on a personal level. When his father insists that he will not deny his anti-party activities, Odili observes:

Men of worth nowadays simply forget what they said yesterday. Then I realized that I had never really been close enough to my father to understand him. I had built up a private picture of him from unconnected scraps of evidence. Was this the same D.O.’s Interpreter who made a fortune out of the ignorance of poor, illiterate

---

<sup>6</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

villagers ... or had I got everything terribly, lopsidedly wrong? Anyway, this was no time to begin a new assessment.<sup>9</sup>

Odili's "private picture" of his father privileges the elder man's unlikable public image and uses it as the primary lens for understanding him. The text contrasts Hezekiah's sense of principle and political pragmatism with Odili's naïveté and pusillanimity. His father openly admits his reliance on the percentages he receives from Nanga's party, demonstrating that working within a set, albeit corrupt, political hierarchy ensures the survival of his party. Although his father freely admits that "the mainspring of political action was personal gain," Odili is hardly able to specify the rationale for his own political activity: "[T]hings seemed so mixed up; my revenge, my new political ambition and the girl...it was just as well that my motives should entangle and reinforce one another."<sup>10</sup> Odili's father is quick to observe that Odili's knowledge of "book" prevents him from understanding the repercussions of planning Chief Nanga's downfall: "So you really want to fight Chief Nanga! My son, why don't you fall where your pieces could be gathered?"<sup>11</sup> Yet, Odili's does not think much of his father's concern, viewing his advice as self-serving. Although Odili's father tells Chief Nanga that he does not support Odili's actions, Hezekiah's celebration of the launch of Odili's political party and his refusal to deny his participation in anti-party activities emphasizes his stalwart and honest nature.<sup>12</sup> Odili is unable to view his father as an individual who may actually possess a firm set of moral values. To understand his father outside of the "private picture" he creates (which revolves around his father's lack of integrity) would be tantamount to discrediting his desire for social autonomy because it is Odili's belief in the lack of fatherly recognition he receives from Hezekiah that forms the basis of Odili's relationship with Nanga, a representative of charismatic state power.

---

<sup>9</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 115, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 118.



Nanga's recognition of Odili as an individual shows that Odili is not truly concerned with his father's, or Nanga's, patent lack of integrity but simply his own self-interest. In anticipation of Chief Nanga's visit to their school, the headmaster, Mr. Nwege, asks his teachers to line up in an orderly fashion. Odili disapproves of Mr. Nwege's overzealous efforts to make the school presentable—efforts which demand that Odili and the teachers demonstrate a certain level of servility and, hence, conformity: "I had objected to this standing like school children at our staff meeting, thinking to rouse the other teachers. But the teachers in that school were all dead from the neck up."<sup>13</sup> Odili wants to distance himself from the rowdy crowd awaiting Nanga, which he feels is ignorant in its unquestioning regard for a corrupt leader.<sup>14</sup> The "silly villagers," Odili disdainfully observes, display their ignorance in their willing embrace of Chief Nanga, "one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation."<sup>15</sup> Nanga's individualizing gestures, however, mitigate Odili's disapproval. Chief Nanga recognizes Odili as one of his former students, displaying a marked interest in his achievements. He praises Odili's intelligence for he "used to tell the other boys in [his] class that Odili [would] one day be a great man and they [would] be answering him sir, sir."<sup>16</sup> Odili frames Nanga's excitement in terms of the reunification of father and son: "If he had just found his long-lost son he could not have been more excited."<sup>17</sup> Odili is swayed by the status reversal that Nanga's words enact. Nanga frames Odili as a powerful individual when Nanga casts himself as a

---

<sup>13</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Olawale Awosika asserts that Odili is perhaps more oblivious than the masses in terms of the inaccuracy with which he perceives the current leadership, and especially Chief Nanga. While he may be able to confirm the validity of the stock image of the politician, Nanga, as morally and intellectually inferior, Olawale states that such an account would be incomplete without acknowledging that Nanga does not always fit the image of irresponsibility that Odili paints of him. For instance, "Odili has cause to confess that he is surprised by Nanga's uncharacteristic ability to respond to demanding social and even official occasions" (287-288).

<sup>15</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

“servant” who must, “busy or no busy ... see his master.”<sup>18</sup> Nanga’s devaluation of his status puts him on an even footing with the crowd who eagerly lap up the temporary elevation of one of their own: “[Odili] became a hero in the eyes of the crowd.”<sup>19</sup> Odili’s newfound approval is questionable given the impressionable crowd’s admiration of Nanga who deftly forges links with the crowd. For instance, he cultivates the crowd’s admiration by asserting that he would have preferred to speak in the local language but feared excluding those who do not belong to the local community.

Nevertheless, Nanga’s assertion that these outsiders “were all citizens of our great country whether they came from the highlands or lowlands” is contradicted by his warning to Odili that “[w]e shouldn’t leave everything to the highland tribes.”<sup>20</sup> Nanga masterfully elicits the public response he desires. Although Nanga is simply intent on augmenting his power by affecting solidarity with the people and flattering Odili (he makes sure that a newspaper correspondent takes note of the large crowd and observes that Odili was destined for greatness), Odili thrives on this orchestrated form of public recognition, as it seems to validate his desire for individualism.

The hazy and thus potentially biased nature of Odili’s reading of his father contrasts with the lack of perceptiveness that Odili brings to his evaluation of Chief Nanga’s character. In the same way he casually attributes ulterior motives to his father, he views Nanga’s actions as wholly transparent. For instance, he notes that although better suited for an outdoor life of continuous social interaction, Nanga demonstrates his commitment to his office job when he leaves for work punctually: “He looked as bright as a new shilling in his immaculate white robes. And he had only come home at two last night, or rather this morning!”<sup>21</sup> Odili suggests that Nanga, despite his undisciplined nature and late night exploits, is making a conscientious effort to keep up appearances.

---

<sup>18</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 14 and p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

The novel also points up the flawed nature of Odili's judgment through his assessment of Nanga's apparent weaknesses. For example, during a trip to see Chief Koko, the Minister for Overseas Training, about his scholarship, the text emphasizes Odili's impression that he has access to privileged information about Nanga. In this scene, Chief Koko believes that his cook has poisoned his coffee and begins screaming in fear that his underlings have conspired to kill him. Before it is revealed, in ironic fashion, that the cook simply substituted a government-promoted and local coffee product in place of the Minister's usual Nescafé, Nanga rushes to the phone to seek help. Although Nanga only rushes to the phone after Odili tells him to make the call, Odili concludes that Nanga fears that he might become the victim of such threats: "I was saying within myself that in spite of his present bravado Chief Nanga had been terribly scared himself, witness his ill-tempered, loud-mouthed panic at the telephone."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Nanga's advice to Odili that he should "run away" if anybody asks him to become a Minister adds to the private picture of vulnerability that Odili forms.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Odili observes, during a book exhibit of works by local writers, that Nanga seems invulnerable to public humiliation. Although he does not know the name of his country's most famous novel, he still receives applause. However, this impression of Nanga's invincibility is dispelled when the editor of a local newspaper corners Nanga with the expectation that he can play on the Minister's fear of public disgrace. Odili waits for an indication that Nanga wishes him to leave: "[N]o hint was given. On the contrary I felt he positively wanted me to stay."<sup>24</sup> Odili's impression that Nanga wants him to stay emphasizes his belief that Nanga has taken him into his confidence and, even, desires his moral support. Once again, Odili seems to have a clear knowledge of the Minister's insecurities as he observes that Nanga humors the editor with his attention and

---

<sup>22</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 35

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

gives him some cash in order to guarantee the maintenance of his public reputation. When Nanga cautions Odili about the trials of being a minister, Odili notes: “His voice sounded strangely tired and I felt suddenly sorry for him. This was the nearest I had seen him come to despondency.”<sup>25</sup> And, yet, although Nanga presents himself as the victim of this exchange, he also reassures the Minister of Construction, an ally in his bid to secure votes for the upcoming election, that the press will not publish anything about his corrupt dealings. Nanga’s shows of weakness seem to downplay his power and build up the illusion of trust between himself and Odili.

Odili’s emphasis on his knowledge of Nanga’s feelings and how they diverge from his public image creates the impression of reciprocity, mutual recognition and, most significantly, the impression that “it was all going to happen, as it were, under [Odili’s] command” and, thus, as if he possessed complete control.<sup>26</sup> The pair’s encounter with the up-and-coming writer, Mr. Jalio, the President of the Writers’ Society, who has invited Nanga to open a book exhibition, reveals Odili’s naïveté regarding Nanga’s power. The novel sets up Jalio as a model of intellectual non-conformism. As Odili notes, Jalio’s authorial success brings about a distinct turn in his demeanor: “I read an interview he gave to a popular magazine in which it came out that he had become so non-conformist that he now designed his own clothes. Judging by his appearance I should say he also tailored them.”<sup>27</sup> Here, Jalio’s non-conformism, beyond an indicator of success, is a marker of an unrestrained self-fashioning that does not seem to depend on public approval. When Jalio, a writer recently plucked from obscurity, fails to remember his name the novel emphasizes Odili’s social anonymity. Jalio’s pretentiousness, which is emphasized by the fact that he “didn’t seem to care particularly,” shows that he does not bother with social niceties. Jalio’s quarrel with Nanga, however,

---

<sup>25</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

reveals that Jalio's non-conformist mannerisms are no match for Nanga's unsurpassable power. Nanga is outraged when he finds that a large number of diplomats will be attending the book exhibition (exposing him to the view of the foreign community). Furthermore, when Nanga asks Jalio why he is so shabbily dressed, Jalio's defiant response that his dress is not subject to the opinions of others is met with Nanga's sharp rebuke: "If you want me to attend any of your functions you must wear a proper dress...That is the correct protocol."<sup>28</sup> When Nanga dresses Jalio down, he demonstrates that no one can circumvent his authority. Odili's defense, although meek, of Jalio's dress and his discomfort at being held up as a model of decorum by Nanga (he is wearing a suit) reiterate his unwillingness to stoop to the demands of others: "It was getting quite embarrassing for me...for much as I disliked Jalio's pretentiously bizarre habit, still I did not care to be set up as a model of correct dressing."<sup>29</sup> Nanga's reversal of sentiment toward the reluctantly submissive Jalio, in which he praises his behavior, rattles Odili because it shows that Nanga reshapes reality to fit his expectations and that he is able to effortlessly gloss over Jalio's individualistic combativeness. Odili reaffirms the strength of Jalio's non-conformist attitude when he suggests the mistaken nature of Nanga's perception. He claims that Jalio is only dubbed "well-comported" because of his sycophantic praise of Nanga, Nanga's observation of the ambassadors' respect toward Jalio and, lastly, because Nanga, who does not possess a strong command of English, is hardly accurate in his choice of words.<sup>30</sup> Odili, therefore, overlooks the signs of Nanga's manipulation and power. Nevertheless, Nanga's praise of Jalio as displaying commendable behavior evokes his complete disregard for the individualistic affectations of his social inferiors.

---

<sup>28</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

In *A Man of the People*, Odili and Chief Nanga's camaraderie is rooted in shared sexist attitudes aligned with the expression of a dominant male identity. In the novel, these perceptions revolve around the image of women as victims, and sexual objects, and the belief that women, primarily through their sexuality, compromise or corrupt male integrity. While Odili intimates that the description he offers Nanga of Elsie as a "good-time girl" is not justifiable, he is nevertheless inclined to adopt the patriarchal and chauvinistic rhetoric of the state: "[H]aving already swopped many tales of conquest I felt somehow compelled to speak in derogatory terms about women in general."<sup>31</sup> Odili, therefore, willingly projects a self-image whose sexist terms Nanga repeatedly elicits, revealing Odili's implicit acceptance and internalization of a chauvinistic code of behavior. Similarly, after his successful conquest of Odili's girlfriend, Elsie, Chief Nanga attempts to placate Odili through his appeal to the privileged position of male integrity and the value of the male social bond when he claims that Elsie is but a "common woman."<sup>32</sup> Odili echoes this view when he silently acknowledges that "[he] should have known that she was a common harlot."<sup>33</sup> The fact that "he should have known" suggests that Elsie's ungovernable sexuality is a threat to male integrity. Here, Odili has, ironically, failed to heed Nanga's cautionary advice that women have a mind of their own ("Any person wey tell you say woman no get sense just de talk pure jargon") and can, therefore, make a man look like a fool.<sup>34</sup> This oversight, as Nanga illustrates through one of his stories of conquest, is the downfall of the husband of a woman he seduced. This man, he recounts, believed that traditional medicine would "scare her into faithfulness."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Odili's failure to recognize that he cannot control Elsie and apply Nanga's chauvinistic logic results in his humiliation. In the

---

<sup>31</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

novel, Odili hopes that he will have a chance to reject Elsie when she eventually shows up crying tears of shame: “The humiliating wound came alive again and began to burn more fresh than when first inflicted...Elsie had not come. My eyes misted, a thing that had not happened to me in God knows how long.”<sup>36</sup> Elsie, who does not show up, ironically, takes on a masculinized role in her disregard for Odili’s feelings. Odili, on the other hand, is reduced to a pitiable position that places him on the brink of emasculation. In *A Man of the People*, Odili’s desire for individualism is framed as an attempt to restore male integrity through his sexual conquest of Edna (Nanga’s young wife-to-be): “I saw that Elsie did not matter in the least. What mattered was that a man had treated me as no man had a right to treat another...and my manhood required that I make him pay for his insult.”<sup>37</sup> Nanga’s manipulative treatment of Odili emphasizes his lack of independence and freedom and that he is not seen as Nanga’s social equal—as a man. Odili’s failure to fully master the terms of a patriarchal masculinity illustrates the text’s mocking repudiation of his individualistic claims.

Odili’s mission to justify his individualistic pursuits is visible in his preoccupation with Mrs. Nanga whom he figures as the most lamentable female victim of Nanga’s political success. Odili wonders what had become of Mrs. Nanga who used to dress in a certain style that once was “the very acme of sophistication.”<sup>38</sup> When Odili finally meets Mrs. Nanga, he takes note of her “matronly” appearance and her use of pidgin English—characteristics unlike the sophistication she seemed to embody. As Mrs. Nanga admits, she is “too bush” and does not possess a “modern” education to complement her husband’s now lofty position.<sup>39</sup> Odili observes that, in tune with his newfound power, Chief Nanga pursues modern (often Western-educated) women like Edna and Mrs. Akilo. Indeed, Mrs. Akilo’s “sophisticated, assured manner” unsettles the seemingly confident

---

<sup>36</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. 88-89.

Odili, but he wards off these feelings with the knowledge that “Chief Nanga who was barely literate was probably going to sleep with her that night.”<sup>40</sup> Here, sexual conquest mitigates the undefined threat that Mrs. Akilo represents. In order to lend moral force to his quest to circumvent Nanga’s paternalistic recognition, Odili feigns praise of Mrs. Nanga’s traditional womanhood instead of the “sophisticated” modern womanhood represented by Edna. Mrs. Nanga stands, in Odili’s mind, for the invisible nation, overlooked and unfairly treated by its corrupt political leaders. She “toiled and starved when there was no money”—a sacrifice she fears will go unremembered with the coming of Nanga’s new wife.<sup>41</sup> In the novel, Mrs. Nanga reminds Odili of a poem that Max, a politically minded friend who heads up the Common People’s Convention, writes. Mrs. Nanga seems to embody the suffering nation of Max’s poem, which has no hopes of ever being compensated for her sacrifices: “Poor black mother! Waiting so long for her infant son to come of age and comfort her and repay her for the years of shame and neglect.”<sup>42</sup> In order to shore up his case for seeking revenge against Nanga, Odili plays up the value of Mrs. Nanga’s traditional womanhood, suggesting to her that her value has been underestimated. For instance, Odili emphasizes Mrs. Nanga’s experience as a wife and mother against the naïveté of Edna who is “only a little girl really.”<sup>43</sup> He insists that her academic credentials are far “superior” to Edna’s modern education.<sup>44</sup> Odili views Mrs. Nanga as a maternal figure whose stoic willingness to tolerate Nanga’s injustice indirectly condones what is symbolically figured as a quest to restore the rightful position of a neglected nation.

---

<sup>40</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 89.



Contrastingly, Odili also appeals to the modern sensibilities of Edna in order to promote his mission to undermine Nanga's authority. Yet, like Mrs. Nanga, Edna, too, is a female victim. In contrast to his treatment of Mrs. Nanga, however, Odili strategically implies that Edna's victimhood stems from a vast store of untapped potential. Odili attempts to convince Edna that she must reject Nanga's efforts to pigeonhole her in the mold of traditional womanhood. Although Edna is painfully aware of her indebtedness to Nanga (who is paying for her higher education and providing money to support the care of her ailing mother), Odili emphasizes that she is limiting her personal horizons. Therefore, in order to further his interests, Odili claims that an "educated girl" like Edna "deserves better than to marry an ancient polygamist."<sup>45</sup> Emphasizing Nanga's age and outmoded beliefs, Odili plays upon Edna's desire for independence. Although Odili refers to Edna as a "little girl" and praises her "domestic responsibility," he strategically places within her reach an image of independent womanhood that is free of Nanga's patriarchal command.<sup>46</sup>

Odili's flirtation with the American expatriate, Jean, illuminates, ironically, his inability to apply the patriarchal principles of a traditional masculinity that would enable him to occupy a position of control. Odili observes that Jean, who eagerly flirts with Nanga, is far more aggressive in her demeanor than her husband: "He seemed the quiet type and, I thought, a little cowed by his beautiful, bumptious wife."<sup>47</sup> After her dinner party, Jean insists to a guest who offers to take Odili home that Nanga has asked her to ensure his safe return. Jean's manipulative and aggressive streak comes into view when she receives a call from one of her foreign female guests who, having also displayed interest in Odili, inquires about his whereabouts. Instructing Odili with a firm grasp not to move, Jean tells her friend that Odili has already left. Jean displays a level of self-assuredness and

---

<sup>45</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

manipulative control that the text elsewhere associates only with Nanga's surreptitious seduction of Elsie. During his romantic dalliance with Jean, Odili is cowed into a position of submission by his inability to read Jean's thoughts and decipher the intentions behind her observations. Considered "a most complicated woman," Jean defies the masculinist logic of reason that Odili applies to Elsie.<sup>48</sup> In Odili's mind, Elsie is a knowable territory, readily defined and mastered: "I saw Elsie—or rather didn't see her—as she merged so completely with the darkness of my room, unlike Jean who had remained half undissolved like some apparition as she put her things on in the dark."<sup>49</sup> When Jean drives Odili through the town of Bori, Odili is taken aback by her fascination with the street names, which she notes have been chosen in honor of Chief Nanga rather than great historical events and actors (as European practice would have it). The condescending manner, with which Jean alludes to the arrogance and excess of the state, provokes Odili's silent resentment: "Who the hell did she think she was to laugh so self-righteously?"<sup>50</sup> The novel suggests, however, that Jean is aware that while "wide, well-lit streets bore] the names of...well-known politicians," "obscure lanes" and "little streets" bore the names of "some unknown small fish."<sup>51</sup> The novel's subtle linkage of the size of the streets to the status of various politicians echoes Jean's earlier remark to Odili about the phallocentricism of the sexual act: "The man uses a mere projection of himself."<sup>52</sup> Here, the meaningless nature of the sexual act as experienced by a man—a "mere projection"—is echoed by the shallow projections of the male self in the size and name of the streets in Bori. Jean exposes the flawed patriarchal logic that undergirds the expression of political power as she shows that the act of naming something after oneself does not automatically grant the individual respect or bestow

---

<sup>48</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 55.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

legitimacy upon his power. Although Odili acknowledges the truth of her observations, Odili's defensiveness illustrates his unwillingness to admit the flaws that expose the superficial nature of the state's patriarchal logic given that it is a logic to which he himself subscribes.

*A Man of the People* shows that the intellectual naively believes that he is entitled to his individualistic pursuits, causing him to substitute one vision of patriarchal authority for another. The sense of conviviality and familiarity that characterizes Odili's relationship with Nanga disarms Odili and causes him to act as if he has the upper hand. Odili distances himself from the seemingly debased vision of patriarchal authority upheld by his father although he is open and transparent about his intentions and actions. Nanga's power, however, lacks the transparency that Odili mistakenly attributes to it. While he seems to acknowledge Odili's uniqueness as an individual, he does not view Odili in terms of an equal but as someone who should respect his authority. Although he makes charismatic overtures toward inclusiveness, he does so in the interest of preserving a fixed hierarchy (as in the speech he gives at the grammar school). Achebe also mockingly condemns the intellectual's quest for individualism through his representation of Odili's weak masculinity. Ironically, Mrs. Nanga, who seems non-threatening in her uneducated ways to Odili, exposes his manipulative tendencies. She cuts him down to size when she learns he has declared himself a candidate in the elections: "[Y]ou may thank your personal spirit that there is no strong man in the house. That is why you can sneak here in the noonday....Mrs. Nanga ... raised her voice so the entire village could hear....I had begun the retreat as soon as she had removed her head-tie and girdled her waist firmly with it pulling the two ends as I had seen Edna's father pull his rope."<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Nanga's aggressiveness and her firm disciplinarian stance expose Odili's cowardice. The novel also aligns Odili with the undignified, impotent, and bootlicking figure of Mr. Nwege. In a calculated yet

---

<sup>53</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 104.

bungled effort to win over Edna and usurp Nanga's role as paternal benefactor, Odili gives her a ride to the hospital on his bike. Edna's praise of his masculine strength as he "eat[s] all the hills like yam" is negated when Odili crashes on the road.<sup>54</sup> This humiliation recalls Mr. Nwege who, riding an old bicycle with faulty brakes, almost collides with a descending lorry on the opposite slope and, as a result, is perpetually ridiculed. The text further reiterates this impotency and, thus, the failure of Odili's bid for independence, in Nanga's cunning interception of and written response to Odili's love letter to Edna—a fact only grasped retrospectively by Odili.<sup>55</sup> Odili's humiliation reiterates his weakness and reasserts the illegitimacy of his desire for individualism.

## 1.2 Making a Case for Individualism in *Waiting for an Angel* (2002)

*Waiting for an Angel* recounts the life of Lomba, a political detainee, before and after his imprisonment. Following a non-linear temporal logic, *Waiting for an Angel* looks back at a past dominated by the urban struggle of a people dispossessed by a despotic state. Through its focus on the past, the text highlights Lomba's doubts about the transformative potential of revolutionary action. The novel underscores the inescapability of death, evoking a fatalism that throws into relief the futility (and frequently life-threatening nature) of revolutionary action against a palpable vein of social idealism. Unlike *A Man of the People*, which dismisses the intellectual's desire for self-gratification by aligning him with the neocolonial state, *Waiting* looks more favorably on the claims of the individual in the context of an unending struggle against state violence. The novel is structured as a loosely connected series of memories that seem to emanate from Lomba's mind

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

<sup>55</sup> Although Edna's letter seems formulaic enough to warrant suspicion and recalls the title of one of Nanga's speechwriting books (*Speeches: How to Make Them*)—"Some of it was Edna and some (like the bit about visions of tomorrow) clearly was not"—Odili does not consider the possibility of Nanga's involvement (112).

during his imprisonment, which precedes all other events in terms of its presentation in the text. The novel's structure, therefore, mimics that of the prison memoir, which although impressionistic, as Ngugi observes of *Detained*, gradually gives rise to a "composite picture."<sup>56</sup> While the novel opens by foregrounding Lomba's voice, the text mimics the associative nature of memory by turning to jumbled yet interrelated past events. The reader does not, however, reconstruct Lomba's past as a composite picture solely through his first-person narrative. The text uses a mixture of first-person narration, third-person narration, and focalized perspectives to present the details of Lomba's life before his imprisonment.

Refracting Lomba's life through various narrative perspectives, the form of the novel allows readers to construct a picture of Lomba that offsets the self-referential qualities of Lomba's own first-person narration in both the present and past of the story. On another level, the division of the narrative into the present and past throws into relief a dramatic shift in the text's portrayal of Lomba as intellectual. This shift, along with the thematic correspondences between various narrative accounts that inhabit the past, which seem to comprise bits and pieces of Lomba's memory, reflects the irresolvable nature of the conflict facing the African postcolonial writer. This conflict revolves around the need to disentangle a commitment to the self from the context of an ongoing collective struggle that figures this commitment as a betrayal of the nation. *Waiting* attempts to frame individualism in terms of a commitment to the self but reveals it as fantasy.

*Waiting* interrogates the grounding of a commitment to social struggle in a narrative of heroic sacrifice. In the section told from the perspective of Kela, a young boy whose parents send him to live with his aunt in Lagos, Brother, an inhabitant of Poverty Street, repeatedly narrates the story of

---

<sup>56</sup> See "Ngugi's *Detained*" in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. Ed. Oliver Lovesey. p. 197. The text's structure also reinforces Teacher Joshua's belief that life only makes sense in retrospect: "Not all things must be understood immediately ... The important thing is to see and memorize all the faces and ideas and impressions, and one day they will begin to make sense to you" (186).

how he lost his leg in a skirmish with military soldiers. The many versions of the story Brother tells highlight his contributions to the anti-military riots: “I had heard over five versions of it. In one version, Brother had killed two soldiers with his bare hands before a third soldier shot him in the leg...This was the most heroic of all the versions.”<sup>57</sup> Whether these versions are imagined or real is a question the novel poses implicitly as Kela is cautioned by his tutor, Joshua, to treat Brother’s stories as an example of the use of hyperbole: “Most stories, in order to achieve maximum effect, have to be exaggerated.”<sup>58</sup> Although Brother lives in ramshackle housing and his palm is “callused, like a farmer’s,” the novel alludes to the way in which his status as a legend seems to mitigate the reality of those impoverished conditions: “Outside on the street, Brother was a hero. Women and children would point at him as he hobbled past on his one good leg and the wooden one.”<sup>59</sup> When Kela explains to Brother that he is originally from Jos, Brother eagerly offers up a heroic account of his past by recounting how his stint as a bus driver in Jos ended when he lost his leg—the result of “handl[ing] five [sojas] with [his] bare hands”—and by imposing the limited scope of his own existence onto the uncomfortable Kela: “Heat and soja. If the heat no kill you, soja go harass you.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, for Brother, the scope of stories of resistance on Poverty Street is limited to that of private narrative. Brother’s inability to see past this horizon is illustrated through his burst of aggression toward Nancy, the young cook who works for Kela’s Auntie Rachel. Nancy, who writes epigrams, proverbs, couplets and clichés in graffiti on the restaurant’s walls, dedicates her spare time to “cleaning, correcting, re-writing” her creations.<sup>61</sup> Brother’s anger over her latest phrase, “Poor Man’s Paradise” reveals Brother’s refusal to admit a reality that diverges from his own. To characterize

---

<sup>57</sup> Helon, Habila. *Waiting for an Angel*. p. 130.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133; p. 131.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135.

Poverty Street as “paradisiacal” instead of a “flux point for all vices” is to destroy the basis for Brother’s vainglorious narrative of survival.<sup>62</sup> For example, when Brother challenges Nancy’s description of Poverty Street as a Poor Man’s Paradise, he expresses his indignation at her overt celebration of the present—a celebration that nullifies the value of Brother’s past and future-based escapist narratives. For this reason, Brother transposes a narrative of heroic sacrifice from the past onto Nancy’s narrative of dignified and stoic struggle, setting himself up as the victim of “all the big big Generals” who “drive long long motor cars with escort while [he] no even get two legs to walk on.”<sup>63</sup> What begins as a narrative of wrongdoing that affects an entire community ends as a narrative of Brother’s triumph: “I, a hero. I fight.”<sup>64</sup> However, Nancy destroys Brother’s carefully constructed illusion of heroism by revealing his absence from the struggle: “You all ran and hid inside your wives’ water pots, blocking your ears to the sounds of the soldiers raping your wives.”<sup>65</sup> Brother’s projection of an imagined self parallels that which is created by Mao, the self-important militant who idealizes Ken Saro-Wiwa (hanged for his political activism in 1995) as an exemplary political martyr. When Kela’s aunt describes the gruesome nature of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s death she demonstrates that the self elevated by political martyrdom is also reduced to an undignified end: “When the bottom falls from the victim’s universe he also loses control of his sphincter muscles...all this before finally dying of asphyxia.”<sup>66</sup> Kela’s aunt’s unsentimental description of the prosaic nature of a martyr’s death, and her emphasis of the martyr’s undeniable mortality, troubles the romanticization of the self-sacrificing hero caught up in violent struggle.

---

<sup>62</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting for an Angel*. p. 123.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 165.

In contrast, Teacher Joshua, a talented intellectual who also lives on Poverty Street, seems to represent an alternative to the “exaggerated militantism” that Mao and Brother espouse.<sup>67</sup> Unlike the vocal Mao, who commands his own entourage, Joshua questions Mao’s radical sentiments, asking of the revolution, “How are you going to do it?” and “Can you?”<sup>68</sup> Mao argues for the value of a struggle waged, in Fanonian terms, by an economically oppressed people against a violent neocolonial government: “According to Frantz Fanon, violence can only be overcome by greater violence.”<sup>69</sup> Mao’s actions echo the dramatic and theatrical gestures of Brother in a way that suggests the impractical and unrealistic nature of his revolutionary aims: “There was something comical in his exaggerated militantism. And sometimes I’d catch Joshua trying to suppress an amused smile as he nodded gravely at Mao’s fist-waving comments.”<sup>70</sup> Unlike the overly excitable Mao, Joshua, who lives in a room that “blazed like a lighthouse,” seems to stand, amidst fervent calls for revolution, as a lonely figure of calm, guidance and stability.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, the novel evokes the duality of Mao and Joshua who, discussing the possibility of revolution, become two shadows, as they “looked even more shadowy, indistinct, merging into each other and the wall behind them.”<sup>72</sup> This “merging” reflects Joshua’s doubleness, which is a product of the ideological tension that the novel figures through him. This tension coalesces around the poles of America and Hagar, Joshua’s romantic interest. In *Waiting*, Joshua stands alone on the beach, looking out at the horizon: “Joshua pointed straight at the misty horizon and said somewhere on the other side lay America. He said that if the vast ocean were magically shrunk into a tiny brook, or a narrow river, we could be staring at some beach on the American coast—New York,

---

<sup>67</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 160.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 161.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 161.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 160.



perhaps.”<sup>73</sup> For Joshua, America stands for the humanistic promise of an unfettered personal future; it represents a “normal country” where “there wouldn’t be a need for revolutions.”<sup>74</sup> It is a point of stability where the basic right to life is attainable. A former student of Joshua’s, Hagar falls from a state of intellectual promise into prostitution. While Joshua cultivates hope in the possibility of change (and changing Hagar), he alternately seeks to win over and distance himself from Hagar. Joshua’s indecision regarding his relationship to Hagar stems from his inability to accept Hagar’s belief that she “belong[s] to the past...like an appendix: useless, vestigial, even potentially painful.”<sup>75</sup> Hagar’s claim that she belongs to the past and that she has no function or helpful role to play in the present contrasts the tragic hopes of the other characters in the novel who cling desperately to the promise of the past only to be reminded of how their dreams came up against a violent reality. For example, Kela’s aunt, an alcoholic, escapes into memories of her late husband, a soldier who died in the Biafran war: “Auntie Rachel dreamt backwards, groping back to a time dissolved.”<sup>76</sup> Therefore, while Joshua sees America as a sign of future personal fulfillment and new beginnings, Joshua believes that he may still be able to rescue Hagar from her impoverished circumstances. Nevertheless, Hagar herself insists that she is beyond rehabilitation. Hagar refuses to go back to school because she feels that she no longer shares the naive idealism so characteristic of Joshua. When she tells Kela that she is old, she explains that while she may not have aged physically, she is no longer able to see things through youthful or innocent eyes: “What [Joshua] needs is someone younger, someone untainted.”<sup>77</sup> While Joshua believes he can change Hagar—who seems to embody the nation in ruins—he also believes that freedom or change is only possible if he breaks

---

<sup>73</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 128.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p. 162.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 138.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

completely with this romantic commitment. Joshua's imaginary communion with America on the beach is a solitary activity that foregrounds his attempts to separate himself from the hope of rehabilitating a broken nation. The text alludes to this belief in Joshua's unsentimental response to Kela who asks Joshua what would become of Hagar if he left for America: "What about Hagar? She is not joined to me at the spine, is she?"<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, although Joshua stands apart from the other characters in his view that a future abroad may present the most pragmatic resolution to a stagnant life in the nation he, too, is caught up in a dream of returning to an untainted past.

Although Joshua points up the "romantic foolishness" of violent struggle, he comes to voice an equally questionable form of revolutionary idealism: that change can be effected through peaceful, non-violent struggle.<sup>79</sup> This peaceful mode of protest involves Joshua's decision to calmly communicate a list of the people's requests to the local representative of the state. When Joshua and his supporters are asked to leave, Joshua's willingness to obey this request fades when he sees Hagar who, the novel indicates, had begged Joshua not to lead the demonstration: "A quick transformation came over him, and from then till the end of the day, everything he did was sure and decisive."<sup>80</sup> This decisiveness foreshadows Joshua's return to the idealism of the revolutionary Mao who displays his unspoken approval: "[Joshua's] voice became impassioned . . . Brother hobbled round the drum, nodding vigorously; Mao punched the air with both fists as if an enemy floated there, invisible."<sup>81</sup> Although it is done in a peaceful manner, Joshua's aggressive and unwavering demands trigger the arrival of the anti-riot police. Hagar's death as a result of the ensuing violence reiterates the futility of this peaceful mode of struggle, which ultimately returns to its violent origins.

---

<sup>78</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 163.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p. 162.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 172.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 173.

Kela's refusal to accept the narrowing of Joshua's horizons after Hagar's death points up the characters' tendency to fall back on the imagination as a means of obscuring the limitations of the present. Although he knows that Joshua has remained in Nigeria after Hagar's death, Kela defiantly imagines Joshua's relationship with America instead of Hagar—a vestige of the past—when two men from State Intelligence question him about Joshua's whereabouts. In response to their assertion that “there is a whole ocean to cross before one reaches [America],” Kela asserts the probability of this outcome:<sup>82</sup>

I shook my head patiently. “No. It is not an ocean, it's just a tiny river. All you have to do is imagine it.” . . . I came back with my Pathfinder's Atlas and spread it open before them. They were amused and a little intrigued by my earnestness. I pointed. “See, this is Africa, this is Nigeria, and here is Lagos.” I drew a line. “Across is America. If we could magically shrink up the ocean and reduce it to a little river, then all we'd need to get to the American shore is a tiny bridge. A walking distance, really.” They laughed and stood up to go.<sup>83</sup>

In this scene, Kela assumes the role of a pioneer, charting a new route through what remains, to his skeptical auditors, an unexplored region. The intelligence officers' dubbing Kela “a young philosopher” reinforces the idea that the path he charts is not a tangible material reality but a construction of his mind.<sup>84</sup> The line Kela draws to demonstrate the relative proximity of America and Nigeria evokes a straightforward and liberated act of imagination that holds up the individual's capacity to overcome nature's realities—here, all that is needed to realize Kela's dream is a “tiny bridge.” That is, the bridge seems to represent a “pathway” to paradise, a symbol of transition that

---

<sup>82</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 185.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 186.

frames America as a utopian endpoint. However, the overarching contrast between Kela's innocent faith and the state authorities' skepticism dismisses the utopian notion of the mind as a conduit for change, reinforcing the divide between the imagination and reality.

In *Waiting*, Kela's reimagining of Joshua's fate attempts to obscure the limits that circumscribe the range of opportunities available to Joshua as an individual. As Hagar suggests, Joshua is an exceptional individual with much to contribute: "He said he'd write a book one day. He has so much to do, I'd only be a burden to him. He doesn't need me."<sup>85</sup> Hagar's belief that she is a burden and that Joshua should not participate in the demonstration reiterate the notion that the nation is ultimately unsalvageable and that, consequently, Joshua's individual talents are being wasted. Nevertheless, the nation continues to exert a significant affective hold on the individual. Joshua's love for Hagar emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of the responsibility he feels for ensuring her well-being. Although Kela wants to put his faith in Joshua's belief that "everything lay within our grasp, if only we cared to reach out boldly," the novel shows this belief is unrealistic.<sup>86</sup> Joshua's confinement to a national reality extinguishes the possibility of realizing the self's needs or desires. Kela's commitment to Joshua's fantasy of self-realization—to reaching out for something more—is exemplified by his successful completion of the exams for which Joshua helped him prepare. However, Auntie Rachel tempers Kela's faith in the possibility of adhering to this course of self-realization when she paints the futility of acting out the self's potential against the reality of social struggle. She reminds Kela to "[n]ever show them you are brilliant" because "our land is a land of pygmies. We are like crabs in a basket; we pull down whoever dares to stand up for what is right."<sup>87</sup> While Auntie Rachel's relation of "brilliance" to "stand[ing] up for what is right"

---

<sup>85</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 155.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 186.

demonstrates that individual talent is viewed through the lens of revolutionary commitment and not the self, it also reveals that such talent cannot exist in a “stunted” nation without negative consequences. Although Kela’s exceptional exam results validate Joshua’s belief that determination can overcome all limitations, his talent can only become the primary object of a necessary commitment to social struggle rather than the basis for personal self-fulfillment. Here, individual talent means little or nothing without its application to securing the collective good through violent struggle and, therefore, the capacity, or desire, to exceed social norms is something that cannot be acted upon within the nation.

### **1.3 Romantic Egoism and the Demands of Public Struggle**

*Waiting* attempts, through a critique of revolutionary struggle, to recuperate the value of individualism as a means of realizing the inherent capacities of the human being. Individualism is figured as the right to self-determination given the unending violence of social struggle and the repeated failure of attempts to rehabilitate the nation. In this context, America is a place “where people go to when they can’t live in their own country.”<sup>88</sup> If Hagar embodies an unchanging and decayed nation, America represents the fundamental right to regeneration and self-determination. My analysis of Lomba in this section deals only with the text’s representation of Lomba before his imprisonment. In what follows, I will show how, in the case of Lomba, the intellectual’s desire for individualism causes him to conflate communal struggle with a private struggle for creative freedom. This conflation, what I term romantic egoism, comes to the fore through Lomba’s appearance as a figure of neglected genius.

---

<sup>88</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 185.

In the section “Bola,” the reader receives Lomba’s thoughts as an aspiring writer who becomes the adoptive son of a Lagosian middle-class family. A recent transplant to Lagos, Lomba befriends Bola, who familiarizes him with life in the city. Through Lomba’s private remembrance of Bola and his family, the novel highlights the instability and renewed alienation of the intellectual figure in the present. Bola and his family—who constitute a dynamic image of community—balance out Lomba’s introspective and reclusive self. Lomba’s sense of self is shaped by his closeness to Bola’s family who become “a home away from home, another family.”<sup>89</sup> Unlike Lomba, who grows up in the rural North and, later, takes up temporary residence on Poverty Street, Bola’s sophisticated urban family is symbolic, in Lomba’s mind, of the perfect middle-class family. While Bola’s father, a hard-working doctor and a patient father, is “to [Lomba] a perfect role model,” the warmth and affability of Bola’s youthful mother disarms Lomba with her effortless charm: “After a minute with her you were a captive for life.”<sup>90</sup> Lomba, a reticent figure, is drawn somewhat uneasily into his adopted family circle by the antics of Bola’s younger siblings. Despite Lomba’s attempts to “covertly [assess] their movements” from a distance, Bola’s siblings draw their adopted brother into their sphere by designating him the chosen audience for their talents.<sup>91</sup> Through Lomba’s filmic recapitulation of the first day he spent with Bola’s family, the text romantically recalls the intellectual’s temporary place within a space of mutually self-affirming familial ties.

Bola’s mother, who addresses him as if he were a child of her own, provides a kind of motherly acceptance and comfort: “She laughed so easily; she listened with so much empathy, patting you on the arm to make a point.”<sup>92</sup> Unlike his own mother, “Ma Bola was slim, her figure

---

<sup>89</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 65.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70.

unaltered by years of childbirth.”<sup>93</sup> Lomba’s idealization of Ma Bola’s difference highlights the plenitude of her maternal attention against the novel’s evocation of a picture of the intellectual’s neglect. Indeed, when Ma Bola refers to Lomba as she would one of her own children, “[he] [turns] round to see if there was someone else behind [him].”<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, in accordance with traditional views, Ma Bola believes that Lomba’s “level-headed[ness]” is the natural complement to Bola’s “impulsive” temperament.<sup>95</sup> Here, Lomba’s difference from Bola is favorably viewed: “If I was to select a friend for Bola, it’d be you. But Providence has already done it for me.”<sup>96</sup> The predestined quality of Bola and Lomba’s friendship reinforces, in this instance, the productive duality of these distinct figures. Ma Bola’s empathy bestows upon Lomba a degree of maternal recognition, validating and affirming his sense of self.

Bola’s commitment to the struggle against the oppression of the military state effectively disrupts the value that Ma Bola accords to his individual personality. Lomba fails to mitigate Bola’s enthusiasm for social action. Lomba recalls Bola’s unflinching support of the student-run anti-government rallies led by the overzealous revolutionary, Sankara. Sankara evokes Amilcar Cabral’s view of social struggle in which all people must participate in efforts to liberate the nation or risk being labeled a traitor. Bola’s strong identification with the cause Sankara espouses throws into relief the physical symptoms of Lomba’s alienation: “I felt cold; I felt like an imposter, out of place, and my ears deaf. Bola, beside me, was throwing punches in the air and shouting.”<sup>97</sup> The “coldness” that Lomba feels is contrasted with the palpable wave of emotion sweeping the excited mass of

---

<sup>93</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 70.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

“jumping, shouting and sweating bodies.”<sup>98</sup> This contrast in physical states highlights Lomba’s perspective of the crowd who, like adoring fans, seek out the thrills of Sankara’s over-the-top performance: “Before me was a group of girls screaming themselves hoarse, their wigs bobbing and sinking like boats in a storm as they jumped up and down.”<sup>99</sup> Bola’s espousal of Sankara’s belief that “[e]very onlooker is either a coward or a traitor”<sup>100</sup> indicates to Lomba a strain of dogmatism that further heightens Lomba’s alienation.<sup>100</sup> Lomba’s solitary view of the crowd from a distance indicates his inability to relate to their expression of a unified group consciousness.

Lomba views the struggle against the state’s despotism as a struggle to preserve the intellectual’s creative self. In *Waiting*, Bola is arrested and physically abused by state authorities after he attempts to rouse a group of onlookers in a manner reminiscent of Sankara. While the text points to the visible signs of brutality that the police needlessly inflict on Bola’s body, the novel also demonstrates that he lacks the human contours that made him such a memorable figure to Lomba.<sup>101</sup> He is simply a shell of his former self: “His eyes passed over us incuriously before returning to stare with mindless vacuity at the ceiling.”<sup>102</sup> Bola’s “mindless vacuity” creates anxiety in Lomba who “couldn’t continue to stare at that silent, blinking form on the bed any longer.”<sup>103</sup> Crucially, the state’s violence strips the body of what sets it apart from others: the mind of the individual. The deterioration of Bola’s mind into a state of numbness—possessed by events beyond his control—is echoed in Lomba’s own mental unraveling: “Thoughts that converged in a confused,

---

<sup>98</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. pp. 55-56.

<sup>101</sup> Ali Erritouni suggests that *Waiting*’s representation of state power depicts its arbitrary nature: “[Its] excesses, revealed most saliently in the unrestrained violence [it] visit[s] on the body of [its] victim and in their lack of a coherent rationale, expose [its] will to power. As Achille Mbembe points out, power as exercised in the postcolony is ‘raw’ and ‘fetishistic’—that is, it ‘aspires to be made sacred.’ Its ‘primary objective . . . is not to create useful individuals or to increase their productive efficiency’ (2001, 113). Rather, ‘it takes on an autonomous existence. It becomes unaccountable—or, in the words of Hegel—arbitrary to the extent that it reflects only upon itself (111)’ (147)”.

<sup>102</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 82.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 83.



convoluted mass ... slowly receded, frittering away to nothingness. Flooding and ebbing, chafing at the seams of my sanity.”<sup>104</sup> The text further reflects the assault of political violence upon the mind in the invasion of Lomba’s dorm room:

The room looked as if a battle had been fought in it...I picked up a paper from the floor; it was a poem, my poem. I picked up another; it was a page from one of my short stories. I looked at the other papers, recognizing my handwriting, scared to bend down and gather them. Most of them were torn; boots had marched upon them, covering the writing with thick, brown mud. I felt the imprint of the boots on my mind; I felt the rifling, tearing hands ripping through my very soul.<sup>105</sup>

The indiscriminately strewn papers signal the dispersion of Lomba’s creative identity. The crude destruction of Lomba’s poems—stamped with the mark of the state—suggests a fundamental limitation to inscribing an authorial self. Lomba’s perfunctory reply to Adegbite’s lengthy account of the student riots reveals his self-preoccupation. Turning inwards, Lomba fixates instead on his room, noting immediately of Adegbite’s: “—that was all. No torn papers.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, the external violence of a local policeman being set ablaze—a brutal act of social protest—coincides with Lomba’s violence, which reiterates that the self’s desires and wants can only be obtained through recourse to violent means. Lomba’s act of setting fire to his poems and stories announces the limits of self-assertion. Although he is able to assert possession of his artistic creations, he is not able to do so in a setting that does not require him to reproduce the violent logic of revolutionary struggle.

In *Waiting*, the need to ensure one’s physical survival outweighs the need for art as a purely autonomous form of creative expression. When Lomba decides to “go out and get a life” he

---

<sup>104</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 77.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p. 79.

attempts to escape the directionless course that his writing represents given that “the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and the army to read.”<sup>107</sup> The novel, therefore, suggests that art lacks an immediate purpose in the context of the people’s oppression. Faced with this reality, Lomba’s willing turn to the profession of journalism indicates that the unsurpassable limits imposed on the creative self can, perhaps, be mitigated by the façade of actively imposing them on oneself: “I wanted no more limits; only those I set for myself.”<sup>108</sup> While taking on the role of journalist acknowledges this need to ensure basic survival and deal proactively with the limits placed on the poet’s private existence—“[he] needed a job”—Lomba invests a prosaic reporting of “general [political] facts” with creative subjectivity.<sup>109</sup> Spending “the whole night writing and rewriting,” Lomba views his writing as a reflection of this creative self. What is simply a matter of politics becomes an extended creative piece that calls up artful dexterity: “To conclude I use[d] the kerosene-starved house-wives of Morgan Street. I ma[de] them rampage the streets, tearing down wooden billboards.”<sup>110</sup> In this instance, Lomba’s use of hyperbole—a stylistic trait of Brother’s stories—emphasizes that even journalistic writing is divested of its function and simply becomes a means of coping with unfavorable circumstances. Here, Lomba attempts to compensate for the impending negation of self under political despotism by attempting to bring his creative self to bear on his role as the people’s advocate. Nevertheless, the unfavorable reaction of James Fiki, the editor of *The Dial*, to Lomba’s embellishments, which he finds excessive in light of the need to impartially cover political issues, demonstrates the implausibility of working independently within existing social limits.

---

<sup>107</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 194.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.

*Waiting* attempts to reconcile the writer to his role as political activist through the suggestion that writing must be used as a means of securing and advocating for the people's liberation. When Joshua shows up at Lomba's office, asking him to write an article about the plight of the people who live on Poverty Street and the demonstration they are about to stage, Lomba voices his skepticism about the transformative effects of his writing: "You want me to write another article on your street? What good would that do you? Nothing happened after the first one."<sup>111</sup> In response to Lomba's skepticism, Fiki takes Lomba to see the slave museum at Badagry in an attempt to demonstrate how each of the nation's inhabitants is inextricably, even if unwittingly, connected to one another through a larger historical narrative of oppression. Lomba's reluctance to report the demonstration on Poverty Street is contrasted with the slaves' forcibly stifled desire for solidarity. As James illustrates, "It was in the ships that the mouth-locks were used, so that they couldn't console each other and rally their spirits and thereby revolt."<sup>112</sup> James' emphasis on the importance of communication is meant to show that Lomba's unwillingness to publicize Teacher Joshua's story of revolt serves to undermine the people's struggle to win basic rights and freedoms. Here, journalism provides insurance against suppressed communication and plays a concrete role in helping realize the goals of social struggle. As James suggests, communication among individuals is driven by the recognition of one's self in another and the subsequent show of solidarity through empathy that ensues. However, although James reminds Lomba that "[w]e are all in this together," the novel shows that Lomba cannot see beyond his own personal predicament.<sup>113</sup> For example, Lomba's observation of the youths "crossing the bridge towards the rising sun" while he is locked in his room establishes his inability to effect a connection between his self and an impenetrable outer

---

<sup>111</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 192.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 198.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p. 195.

world of mortal delights.<sup>114</sup> This distance between self and a vision of youthful freedom is heightened through the text's representation of writing as a form of slavery rather than a form of liberation. The novel foregrounds Lomba's awareness of the debilitating effects of writing that is constrained by a debased political reality: "The words and sentences, joined end to end, looked ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table . . . .The uncompleted novel would grow hands of iron and strangle me to death."<sup>115</sup> In this passage, Lomba's writing incites a "fanatical loathing" as it symbolizes, in its incompleteness and meaninglessness, the futility of his creative efforts.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the chaos fueled by writing that lacks clarity and, hence, meaning, signifies the writer's imminent death: "Two years, and still no single sentence made sense to me...I felt with epiphanic clarity, that if I sat down and picked up my pen and added a sentence to this jumbled mass, I'd die."<sup>117</sup> Here, the novel suggests that although it is imperative that Lomba finish his novel, Lomba's adherence to this path, which reduces the meaning, integrity and value of his work, will simply result in his death as a writer. In *Waiting*, tropes of imprisonment assert the irreproducible nature of Lomba's predicament.

In *Waiting*, the individual's mounting angst and frustrations surrounding his desire for individualism cause him to view the oppressive circumstances of life in the nation as a direct reflection of his own personal conflict. While the people are figured as the victims of the state's unremitting abuse, the novel's depiction of the intellectual's private desperation renders him a victim of society's neglect. In the context of social struggle, the function of the writer's art is restricted because it must work to highlight the abuses of the state by adhering to a minimalistic style in

---

<sup>114</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 110.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

keeping with the fact-disseminating purposes of journalistic writing. In other words, in *Waiting*, writing does not hold intrinsic value outside of its relationship to political activism.

## 1.4 Imprisonment and the Solipsistic Desires of Self

Lomba's imprisonment by the state represents an extreme intensification of the intellectual's conflation of a private and public struggle. While Ali Erritouni observes that a carceral atmosphere "pervades society as a whole" in *Waiting*, the diffusion of the carceral in Habila's novel is linked to the text's exaggeration of the intellectual's narrowed horizons.<sup>118</sup> Chronologically speaking, Lomba's imprisonment comprises the very last events of the story. However, these events (his term in prison) precede all other story events in terms of its presentation in the text and, therefore, assume a central place of importance. When the reader reaches the end of the novel, which shows Lomba's capture by state police, he or she already possesses knowledge of Lomba's future. That is, on a structural level, the novel performs the narrowing of Lomba's horizons because the reader moves through the novel already knowing the outcome of the story. Like the fortune-teller armed with the dismal knowledge of Lomba's future, the reader also sees nothing but prison ahead of Lomba. In the opening section of the novel, "Lomba," the juxtaposition of the formal trope of diary-writing, which foregrounds the act of leaving a record of the evolving self for the self, and the accompanying third-person account of Lomba's life in prison, which seems interested in providing a more expansive historical and socially conscious context for the writer's struggles, emphasizes the conundrum at the heart of the novel: what makes the present-day intellectual's life worth remembering? What determines his reception? What would moving beyond the public facts of the writer's politicized existence to a view of the writer's subjectivity without compromising the real-world roots or social

---

<sup>118</sup> See Erritouni, Ali. "Postcolonial Despotism from a Postmodern Standpoint: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*," p. 149.

dimension of that private existence entail? In this section, I show that the opening section of *Waiting* treats the intellectual's struggle for creative freedom as representative of a collective struggle for self-realization, throwing into relief an overweening preoccupation with self. This concern with the intellectual's fate comes to the fore in the novel's romanticizing of the creative intellectual's perceived power over the state.

Imprisonment emphasizes the intellectual's desire to exceed the limitations of his physical environment. In "Lomba," imprisonment, paradoxically, seems to represent an unfettered retreat into the self: "I express myself. I let my mind soar above these walls to bring back distant, exotic bricks with which I seek to build a more enduring cell within this cell."<sup>119</sup> Lomba alludes to the mind's capacity to exceed physical limitations, thereby enabling self-construction by reaching back into the past. Lomba's acts of imaginative resistance enable him to preserve an "exotic" and pleasurable space for the self within a fixed reality of mundane limits. Yet, even this imaginative communion with the self is limited given that it does not serve to express the prisoner's individuality or uniqueness. For example, Lomba notes: "[p]rison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice."<sup>120</sup> At the same time, the effort to maintain the self comes up against the lack of "durability" that is the physical "cell": the body. Here, the imprisonment of the physical body is also the imprisonment of the mind. Although Lomba suggests that violent manifestations of the prisoner's anger seems to provide a means of "re-crystalliz[ing] [the] slowly dissolving self," physical violence produces a totalizing negation of the self as it announces the inseparability of body and mind and, ultimately, the threat of that self's extinction.<sup>121</sup> For example, the young prisoner who is brutally beaten for his violent outburst does not regain a sense of self; he is merely transformed into

---

<sup>119</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 14.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

“a skinny mass of eczema inflammations, and ringworm, and snot.”<sup>122</sup> Therefore, what appears to be a mode of self-assertion through physical acts of violence reinforces the limits of the self, which is confined by the mortal body. Prison represents a solipsistic retreat into a self whose material limits are rendered all the more concrete like “the prison wall [that] loomed huge and merciless” before Lomba.<sup>123</sup>

The restrictions placed on the physical body of the intellectual are a product of the state’s apparent violence. The state, represented by the prison superintendent, Muftau, is a figure of self-possession and all-seeing knowledge; for Lomba, the superintendent seems to be unencumbered by the limits of mortal existence. The looming state assumes the spiritual proportions of divinity: “I knew it was me he came for when he stood there, looking bigger than life, bigger than the low, narrow cell.”<sup>124</sup> Muftau exercises a decisive command over his surroundings, waiting to create a pointed dramatic effect: “his voice rang out suddenly. In the frozen silence it sounded like glass breaking on concrete, but harsher, without the tinkling.”<sup>125</sup> Lomba’s characterization of the superintendent’s deliberate movements is contrasted with the animalistic impulses of the warders, who are likened to dogs “[who] licked their chops and growled” at the inmates.<sup>126</sup> Despite his limited command of the English language, the superintendent invokes Lomba’s self and frames Lomba’s physical existence in ontological terms: “I stood up. I stepped forward. He turned the scowl on me. ‘So, Lomba. You are.’”<sup>127</sup> Lomba, recognizing his name, is constituted through this act as the state’s subject: “ ‘Yes, I am Lomba.’”<sup>128</sup> The superintendent reads Lomba’s possession of paper and a

---

<sup>122</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 15.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

pencil as an attempt to bypass this position of subjection, and reasserts his power to relegate this self to a mere externality: “My face struck the door bars and I fell before the superintendent’s boots. I saw blood where my face had touched the floor. I waited. I stared at the reflection of my eyes in the high gloss of the boots’ toecaps.”<sup>129</sup> Here, an external reality, none too distant from that which defined Lomba’s life outside of prison and whose terms are dictated by a seemingly absolute Other, circumscribes the writer’s freedom and threatens, unequivocally, to extinguish the physical self.

Throughout the novel, Lomba struggles to articulate a sense of self that does not rely on an Other, like the state, or the limiting attributes of his environment. Lomba’s struggle in prison revolves around the problem of how to articulate a transcendent notion of self. The novel suggests, through the recurring trope of imprisonment, that the writer’s self is a mere reflection of the physical body: this body is constantly subjected to the constraints of mortal existence. However, Lomba’s desire for complete freedom comes up against his desire for lasting recognition in a social context. Before his imprisonment Lomba attempts to help his editor, James, escape from military authorities seeking his arrest. Lomba observes that even James’s “ordered, rooted life” will “come to an end” for “in front lies nothing but chaos, even exile—as for the slaves remembered in the museum.”<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, there is a resulting, if belated, sense of permanence, Lomba unwittingly suggests, even for those subjected to a life of chaos. Like the slaves whose struggles are memorialized in physical form they, too, may be remembered. On one hand, the intellectual seeks to transcend the limitations imposed by the state to express his full creative potential. On the other, he seeks to achieve a kind of social recognition that valorizes his existence and his continued relevance to the oppressed nation. The form of this part of the novel emphasizes these opposing tendencies. While the first-person narrative encompassed by Lomba’s diary deals with the recording of the

---

<sup>129</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 20.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.



writer's life for the sake of writing as writing, the presence of a third-person narrator seems to point up the placement of this writing, as a reflection of subjectivity, in a larger social context. It emphasizes the passage of time and creates an air of historicity through the trope of witnessing. In other words, the third-person narrator emphasizes the status of Lomba's experience as historical fact while reasserting the significance, for posterity, of the intellectual's experience. This gesture, ostensibly, echoes the authorial statements preserved in the novel's Afterword, which underscore the challenges to the intellectual within a historical narrative of political unrest.

It is through an inspection of the novel's Afterword that we can begin to address the effects of the alternating narratorial voices that characterize "Lomba." Genette writes of paratext that it "surrounds [a text] and prolong[s] it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its 'reception' and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book."<sup>131</sup> Habila's Afterword, falls within this category, which groups together an author's name, a book's title, preface, illustrations among other devices that constitute a threshold between the inside—the text—and the outside or "the discourse of the world on the text."<sup>132</sup> The paratext, as a mediating device between the outside and inside world of the text works to shape a reader's understanding of the text, thereby enabling a "better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading...in the eyes of the author and his allies."<sup>133</sup> In *Waiting*, the personal reflections contained in the Afterword signed Helon Habila and dated January 2002 evoke the author's desire to reorient a particular reception or reading of the text.<sup>134</sup> It hopes to clarify an aspect of the narrative that may have been overlooked or undervalued

---

<sup>131</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts*. p. 261.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p. 261.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 262.

<sup>134</sup> The Afterword or "postface" is "addressed to a reader who is no longer potential but actual" (238). A preface performs two functions: it "hold[s] the reader's interest and guide[s] him by explaining why and how he should read the

by the reader. *Waiting*'s Afterword attempts to connect a private narrative of individual struggle to the political reality represented in the fictional world of the novel but ultimately reaffirms the “representativeness” of the private.

Habila's Afterword situates the novel in terms of a larger history of oppressive military rule, which according to the author, is a history Nigerians recall mainly in terms of the cruelty and corruption of Sani Abacha's dictatorial regime.<sup>135</sup> Its “functional aspect,” conceived as the overarching goal of the paratext, might be construed as purely informational, directing the audience toward the historical specificity and social origins of Habila's novel.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, while Habila's Afterword attempts to depart from a private context that foregrounds the singular situation of the intellectual working under the conditions of political despotism, it ultimately mimics the circular nature of the text as a whole as the commentary is unable to distance itself from its primary perspectival lens: the “lived experience” of the intellectual.<sup>137</sup> The Afterword opens with the author's lamentation: “It was a terrible time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious—and patriotic.”<sup>138</sup> There is immediately in this affirmation a sharp articulation of the intellectual's difference. It was a “terrible time to be alive especially if” you possessed those aspirations most closely associated with the figure at the heart of the text: the intellectual.<sup>139</sup> This

---

text” (238). Unlike the preface, the postface “can hope to fulfill only a curative, or corrective function” (239).

<sup>135</sup> Erritouni notes the historical context that the Afterword provides and writes, also, of the novel's reinforcement of society's carceral atmosphere in the Afterword: “Habila reveals in *Waiting* that the military rulers operate in complete disregard of legal norms, binding laws, and the writ of habeas corpus and that they continually violate the private and public spheres, whose integrity and exemption from government intrusion Jürgen Habermas considers indispensable to a functioning democracy. They have created, in the words of the Afterword, an ‘airless prison-like atmosphere’ (229) that is characterized by brute force, random killings, assassination of opponents, repression of student protests, arbitrary arrests, rape, home invasions, and public torture” (149).

<sup>136</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts*. p. 269.

<sup>137</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 224.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

statement also betrays a disjuncture between two irreconcilable halves: the responsibility of the intellectual to the nation—patriotism—and the exceptional nature of the intellectual’s creative talent.

The Afterword bestows authority upon the writer’s experience by disputing the accuracy of a human rights commentator’s description of Abacha’s abuse of power. Habila argues that the commentator’s condemnation of the state’s arbitrary detention of hundreds of political prisoners and the complete disregard of the rule of law is “actually understating the matter.”<sup>140</sup> To this extent, the Afterword holds up the text’s value as an object worth considering on its own terms, for it serves a corrective function in its attempt to elucidate the actual nature of the state’s corruption and violence. Although Habila asks the reader to inhabit his own lived experience—“Now imagine yourself, young, talented and ambitious, living in such a dystopia”—the inclusivity of this act is undercut by the fact that he frames Lomba’s experience as paradigmatic of all experience: “I think that if there is a passage in this book that illustrates more than any other the lived experience of those years, it is the one where Lomba ... gets a wake-up call from James, his editor. He is told that he can write his novel, but he might never get published...Every day came with new limitations, new prisons.”<sup>141</sup> The abuses of the state are abuses that damage an entire nation: “The weight on the psyche could be enormous; all Nigerians became stigmatized by their rulers’ misdeeds.”<sup>142</sup> Yet, even though Habila suggests that the stigma of the state’s human rights violations affected all Nigerians, his subsequent description of Lomba’s inability to get published because of Nigeria’s expulsion from the Commonwealth of Nations refocuses this critique—once again, we are left with the intellectual and the limitations he encounters. The inability to secure publication is emblematic of the broad Nigerian experience of the time only in the most metaphorical way in comparison to the problems

---

<sup>140</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 224.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* p. 224.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* p. 224.

shouldered by the vast majority of Nigerians. While Habila carefully describes the process of the military's gradual entrenchment in Nigeria, his narrative returns to the oppression of the intellectual class and, to this extent, prioritizes a private story of the self.

While the Afterword seems to lift the text outside of its self-referential orbit through its evocation (however tenuous) of a shared history, the third-person narrator seems to mitigate the solipsistic tendencies of Lomba's narrative by alluding to the historical contingency and "pastness" of the writer's struggle in a manner that resembles a record for posterity. For example, the third-person narrator attests to the difficulty of the writer's experience, and reflects on the challenges of Lomba's diary writing: "It was not easy. He had to write in secret, mostly in the early mornings."<sup>143</sup> The narrator evokes the passage of time by approximating the status of historical record. The reader is privy to details regarding the duration of events and highlights of Lomba's imprisonment. The reader learns when Lomba began writing his diary, the duration of his stay in solitary confinement and the times of his meals. The narrator's commentary also highlights Lomba's actions in terms that reinforce his formidable nature. It mentions that "Lomba managed to put in quite a large number of entries" in the two months before he was discovered, that some of his poems "were his original compositions rewritten from memory," that "a lot were fresh creations" and that "his diary ... show[ed] a very sedulous character at work."<sup>144</sup> The third person narrator also evokes the facts surrounding Lomba's imprisonment—we learn that "a coup was attempted against ... Abacha, by some officers close to him"—while it builds up an aura of exceptionality and unreality around the intellectual himself.<sup>145</sup> This narration, in its desire to convey what happened as "fact" and as linked to the ongoing of the outside world, also casts Lomba's experience as irreproducible.

---

<sup>143</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 13.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16, p. 43.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

Lomba's perception of the state's deficiencies also serves to reaffirm the intellectual's exceptionality and the value of the intellectual's knowledge. When Muftau confiscates and returns Lomba's papers, Lomba observes that the state's representative is unable to communicate fluently: "These. Are the. Your papers.' His English was more disfigured than usual."<sup>146</sup> The disfigured state of Muftau's English echoes the caricature-like properties of his own body: "His legs were planted apart, like an A. He looked like a cartoon figure: his jodhpur-like uniform trousers emphasized the skinniness of his calves, where they disappeared into the glass-glossy boots. His stomach bulged like a belted sack."<sup>147</sup> This suggests that his own language can never approximate the poetic language of the intellectual. Like the physicality of the superintendent's actions, his language can only be comprehended on a material level. Muftau seeks Lomba's approval when he asks him to read the poem he composes for his girlfriend, Janice. Muftau stands in awe of Lomba's evaluation: "He was hardly breathing. I let him wait. Lord, I can't remember another time when I had felt so good. So powerful. I was Samuel Johnson and he was an aspiring poet waiting anxiously for my verdict, asking tremulously, 'Sir, is it poetry, is it Pindar?'"<sup>148</sup> Lomba, therefore, assumes control over the reception of the superintendent's writing. The power he gains has less to do with the act of Muftau's submission but, rather, Muftau's desire to stand apart from Lomba's judgment as poet-intellectual: "Perhaps because I work in prison. I wear uniform. You think I don't know poetry, eh? Soyinka, Okigbo, Shakespeare."<sup>149</sup> The text plays on the meaning of knowledge implicitly ironizing Muftau's equation of knowledge with his listing off of famous poets' names. Lomba's filmic imagination of Muftau and Janice emphasizes Muftau's desperation and underscores the capacity of Lomba's poetry to achieve a desired end. In this scene, the text likens Muftau to an anxious father eager "to please

---

<sup>146</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 36.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

his favourite child,” and evokes his own childish nature: “It is their first outing together. He pestered [Janice] until she gave in....She watches him covertly, He handles his chopsticks awkwardly, but determinedly.”<sup>150</sup> Despite his awkwardness, Muftau’s use of Lomba’s work to impress Janice results in her recognition: “She reaches past the vase ... and covers his hairy hand with hers briefly. “Thank you.”<sup>151</sup> It also, at least in Muftau’s mind, helps to dispel Janice’s view that he is not serious: “I know you think I am not serious. That I only want to suck. The juice and throw away the peel...He suddenly dips his hand into the pocket of his well-ironed kaftan shirt and brings out a yellow paper. ‘Read and see.’”<sup>152</sup> In this instance, Muftau holds up Lomba’s poem as incontrovertible proof that he is a man of substance. The superintendent’s need for recognition makes Lomba’s knowledge an object of immanent value and, therefore, places him in a position of authority.

Self-fulfillment appears, through Janice, as the poet’s sublimated desire for public recognition and the public acceptance of his artistic project as poet-intellectual. Although Muftau grants Lomba a measure of authorial freedom, *Waiting* casts Muftau’s girlfriend, Janice, as the true object of the male poet’s quest because she stands as a reflection of the writer’s individualistic desire for public recognition. Entering the world of the prison from the outside, Janice represents the belated acknowledgment of existence that Lomba seeks. In his plagiarized poems, Janice appears repeatedly as an idealized female figure: “Janice, your beauty is to me/Like those treasures of gold.”<sup>153</sup> She is also a “peer of goddesses.”<sup>154</sup> Likened to “gold” and “goddesses,” Janice is seemingly beyond Lomba’s reach. However, while Lomba’s poems present Janice in terms of idealized

---

<sup>150</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*, p. 29.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

feminine attributes, she appears in reality as a “warm and homely” maternal figure.<sup>155</sup> As a maternal figure, Janice also recalls Ma Bola and her unconditional acceptance of Lomba. Instead of the seemingly elusive female figure of his poetry, Janice lies within Lomba’s reach and, thus, her approval and affection is attainable. Unlike the awkward Muftau, Janice is a picture of feminine sophistication who commands Lomba’s respect. A schoolteacher, Lomba observes that Janice’s “English was correct,” she looked “squeaky clean” and “she had obviously taken a lot of trouble with her appearance.”<sup>156</sup> She also appreciates Lomba’s creative embellishments. It is Janice who expresses unmitigated admiration for the distinctive quality of Lomba’s work: “I love your poems” (38). Even after learning that Lomba has imitated the masters, Janice asserts her approval: “I know—but you give them a different feel, a different tone.”<sup>157</sup> Janice’s sophisticated recognition of Lomba’s individual identity as poet distinguishes her from the unworldly Muftau and the degraded poetic enterprise that Lomba seeks to distance himself from: “I did not want to write any more poems for the superintendent’s lover: I did not want any more of his cigarettes. I was tired of ... being whispered about by the other inmates as the superintendent’s informer, his fetch-water. I wanted to recover my lost dignity.”<sup>158</sup> That is, while the superintendent gives Lomba the opportunity to write, his view of Lomba’s writing is strictly utilitarian and deprives the writer of the recognition he craves. Muftau is interested in the fact that Lomba’s poems “said everything [he] wanted to tell [Janice].”<sup>159</sup> Lomba’s poems are valuable insofar as their content fulfills this particular goal. Their value stems from what is said and not how it is said. For instance, when Lomba “bowdlerizes” Sappho’s ‘Ode,’ Muftau takes delight in the poem’s ability to effect a desired end: “This poem.

---

<sup>155</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*, p. 36.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

Excellent. With this poem. After. I'll ask her for marriage.”<sup>160</sup> Unlike the debased nature of Muftau's creative enterprise, Janice's presence in the prison reaffirms the importance and uniqueness of the poet's endeavors.

*Waiting* uses Janice's empathy for Lomba's plight as a means of elevating Lomba's private struggle and, in doing so, imparts to it a degree of universal significance and, hence, legitimacy. Expressing her admiration for Lomba's unique poetic talents, Janice is also shown to respond to the intellectual's call for help. She holds Muftau accountable for Lomba's continued imprisonment, suggesting that he has not done nearly enough to guarantee his release and that Lomba, as a result, will “be kept here for ever, forgotten.”<sup>161</sup> When Muftau claims that he has made Lomba's stay in prison comfortable, Janice responds indignantly: “How can you be so unfeeling? Put yourself in his shoes—two years away from friends, from family, without the power to do anything you wish to do. Two years in CHAINS! How can you talk of cigarettes and soap, as if there were substitute enough for all that he has lost”?<sup>162</sup> On one level, Janice's confrontational words call up Lomba's “irrational fear” of the nameless self that teeters on the brink of physical extinction: “My body would end up in some anonymous mortuary, and later in an unmarked grave, and no one would know.”<sup>163</sup> Having attested to the aesthetic value of Lomba's poetry, Janice's comments reemphasize the worth of the intellectual's contributions and the possibility that such contributions will simply go unacknowledged. On a second level, Janice, in the maternal spirit of preserving humanity's well-being, lends an air of legitimacy to Lomba's fear of anonymity by placing his individualistic desires on the plane of naturally given rights. In this particular scene, Janice frames the idea of irrevocable

---

<sup>160</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 32.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.



loss in terms of the intellectual's inability to exercise the "power to do anything."<sup>164</sup> The state has, therefore, violated, in Janice's mind, Lomba's power to exercise his right to self-determination.

Furthermore, Janice evokes a language of material exchange that calls up the state's crime in stark Kantian terms; Mufatu's denial of Lomba's freedom is ethically wrong. Having bartered cigarettes and soap for Lomba's poems—objects, which the text suggests, are linked to the expression of the poet's dignity and sense of self—Muftau has effectively treated Lomba as means to an end.

Unaffected by Muftau's pleas for forgiveness, Janice assumes the role of an external arbiter who calls up the poet's essential humanity and the moral imperative that is attached to his quest for freedom.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, the intellectual's inability to legitimize the right to self-determination and, thus, creative freedom, causes him to display a narcissistic form of self-regard. This self-regard is most prevalent at the very beginning of the novel ("Lomba") and in the Afterword. This self-regard is linked to the perception of the poet's work as something whose value cannot be quantified in material terms given the extent of his sacrifice. In "Lomba," the poet-intellectual's creative sacrifice is transformed from a private injustice into a social one. When Janice scolds Muftau and threatens to leave him if he does not make his presence known to Amnesty International, she shows that the intellectual's neglected state is inexcusable and, like the Afterword, aligns the intellectual with the victimized nation that has tolerated severe and unconscionable abuse.

---

<sup>164</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 41.

## 1.5 The Poet's Unalienable Right to Self-Determination

*Waiting* suggests that the ongoing political abuses of the state necessitate the intellectual's commitment to the nation. As Lomba's journalistic stint confirms, the intellectual must endeavor to highlight the dignity of the people and their efforts to resist state brutality. Lomba's imprisonment emphasizes the intellectual's mounting fears that his creative talents will go unnoticed because of the demands of social struggle and the people's prioritization of the fight for survival. In this particular climate, the writer is not the people's primary object of attention. As James reminds Lomba: "You won't find a publisher in this country because it'd be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which nobody would buy, because the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and army to read."<sup>165</sup> These comments heighten the intellectual's perception that he has been abandoned. The structure of the novel itself throws into relief the irresolvable nature of the intellectual's crisis. Specifically, the cyclical pattern of the novel—one that mirrors the endless looping back of one angst-ridden vision of self onto another—reasserts the inescapability of a desire for writerly self-affirmation.

*Waiting* seeks to legitimize an individualistic subjectivity by showing that individualism is simply a product of a fundamental commitment to the self's needs and desires. Every individual, it suggests, should have the right to fulfill this potential. The text's most unequivocal gesture toward the intellectual's desire for liberation turns around its representation of soul music. Despite the roots of soul music in America's history of racial segregation, the text draws repeatedly on the concept of soul to evoke a tacit sense of reciprocity and legitimacy in the quest for the freedom to self-determination.<sup>166</sup> *Waiting* plays on the underlying meaning of soul as a spiritual touch-point for

---

<sup>165</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*, p. 194.

<sup>166</sup> Piero Scaruffi writes: "As the civil rights movement staged bigger and bigger demonstrations and increased African-

communal struggle. In the novel, soul stands for a spiritualized form of universal solidarity and, more significantly, a commitment to enabling the individual's "potentiality to live."<sup>167</sup> In *Waiting*, Lomba and Alice's shared interest in soul music speaks to the idealized potential of the self to escape the particularities and constraints of its material existence. When Lomba meets Alice for the first time, he speaks of "soul calling to soul" he alludes to a spiritual connection that extends beyond time and place (86). Indeed, this desire to stand apart from the facts of material existence evokes Habila's assertion in the Afterword that the political events he depicts in *Waiting* are not "represented with strict regard to time and place" and that his "concern was for the story, that above everything else."<sup>168</sup> The author's privileging of story over "mere historicity" reflects a desire to assert a broader notion of creative freedom and to relate to others outside the context of political existence.<sup>169</sup> Similarly, Lomba imagines an existence unhampered by the constraints of life under a military state. Alice's claim that she gave her soul records away, which follows her announcement of her impending marriage to a wealthy soldier, affects Lomba so profoundly that he lingers fixatedly on one single fact: "She did not listen to soul music any more."<sup>170</sup> The problem of the soul, Joel Rudinow suggests, is that it poses difficult questions regarding the freedom of the will: "In what sense and to what extent do we freely choose any course of action we might take?"<sup>171</sup> The soul, understood by Rudinow, as an "agency of voluntary action," is that which reveals our inclination

---

American pride, soul music became more than party music for young blacks: it became a rallying flag for the black nationalist movement." See <http://www.scaruffi.com/history/soul.html>.

<sup>167</sup> A.J. Reimers notes that, for Aquinas, "the soul is that principle in virtue of which the bodily organism realizes its potentiality to live" (23). He asserts that the soul "acts as the rational principle of the body": "Every action that a human being performs is physical, but the habits by which human actions are regulated are themselves governed by an immaterial principle according to the laws of reason" (271).

<sup>168</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 228.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 229.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. p. 106.

<sup>171</sup> See Rudinow, Joel. *Soul Music: Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to Motown*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. p. 19

towards a particular thing.<sup>172</sup> As the novel shows, Alice's marriage to a wealthier man is not a choice based on her true desires but the result of financial pressure: "It is the money. Are you shocked?"<sup>173</sup> The fact that Alice does not listen to soul music anymore, therefore, signals the quashing of the desire for self-determination and the imprisonment of the individual's will within certain material conditions. Alice's choice of a life of material survival emphasizes the economic hardships of life in the nation and the need to sacrifice the self's "authentic desires." Her choice reflects the contingency of the self and its physical manifestation in the outer world—a contingency that Lomba cannot avoid. He, too, is a prisoner of his circumstances.

Although this chapter has traced the amplification of the intellectual's despair into an exaggerated state of unbearable desperation over his inability to achieve public recognition, this is not to say that the novel lacks moments of self-awareness. In the final section of this chapter, I argued that Lomba's imprisonment represents the intensification of the intellectual's feelings of neglect and illustrates the singular nature of the intellectual's writerly contributions. *Waiting* seems, however, to distance itself in satirical fashion from its portrayal of the intellectual's self-regard during Lomba's encounter with a group of like-minded poets and writers, and even a character who, referred to as Helon Habila, becomes the fictional representative of the author. In this scene, Lomba is introduced to several members of this group, which includes figures who, in actuality, represent important Nigerian intellectuals: Mike Jimoh, Obi Nwakanma, and Toni Kan, for instance. Lomba, after listening to an unnamed poet read his work to a large gathering, is advised: "You really must try and get arrested—that's the quickest way to make it as a poet. You'll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award."<sup>174</sup> After muttering that he does not want to

---

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. p. 19

<sup>173</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 106.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. p. 218.

get arrested, the author's namesake, Helon Habila, throws up over a railing and introduces himself to Lomba. Here, the novel seems to critique the suggestion that the intellectual's desire for recognition would lead him to consider such extremes as imprisonment. To this extent, it would seem that the novel purposefully elicits irony with respect to the advice Lomba receives given that he continuously asserts, during his imprisonment, that he "[has] been forgotten."<sup>175</sup> Here, prison does not lead to fame or social recognition. The mocking tone that the novel builds up in this scene also turns around the farcical and shameless nature of intellectual behavior (drunkenness and vomiting), which allows it to poke fun at the intellectual's feelings of self-importance. Nevertheless, the novel's attempt to emphasize the questionable nature of the intellectual's ambitions, cannot overcome its patent self-regard. The pageant of intellectuals that the novel depicts in this scene highlights its concern with social recognition in relation to Lomba's stark anonymity. Lomba, the novel repeatedly suggests, does not receive the recognition he deserves. For instance, at the close of "Lomba," we learn from the unidentified third-person narrator (who lacks information about Lomba's ultimate fate) that "[a] lot of ... political prisoners died in detention, although only the prominent ones made the headlines—people like Moshood Abiola and General Yar Adua."<sup>176</sup> This statement is echoed by the Afterword, in which Habila claims that "Lomba is merely one of the less spectacular victims in a long pageant, whose ranks boast such names as MKO Abiola, former President Olusegun Obasanjo ... and General Yar Adua."<sup>177</sup> It is here that the plight and sacrifices of the political prisoner—most unequivocally, the intellectual—take center stage.

Furthermore, although *Waiting for an Angel* expresses some cynicism with respect to the intellectual gaining recognition through imprisonment, the Afterword's desire to hold up the value

---

<sup>175</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 25.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* p. 227-228.

of the intellectual's experience causes Habila to invoke the names of those iconic intellectuals whose political activism and unlawful imprisonment continue to resonate with a global audience: Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa. When Habila refers to Soyinka, who was denied access to pen and paper during his imprisonment by the Nigerian state but was able to improvise writing materials, he evokes the challenge that the state posed to the writer's moral integrity: "Even the staunchly anti-military Wole Soyinka was somehow inveigled into accepting a government post under [the Babangida] regime."<sup>178</sup> This threat to the self is encapsulated most forcefully by Habila's reference to the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, since "[m]ost intellectuals had only three options: exile, complicity, or dissent."<sup>179</sup> When Habila observes that "the world was scandalized" by Saro-Wiwa's death, he uses global outrage to emphasize the weight of the intellectual's sacrifice. The Afterword, which is dated and signed by Habila, amplifies the prison-like atmosphere of the primary narrative by taking on the form of Lomba's prison-diary and taking it out of its private context into the public sphere. Barbara Harlow's analysis of the prison memoir is instructive here as she asserts that it differs from "conventional autobiography inasmuch as the narratives are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collectivist enterprise and struggle."<sup>180</sup> And, yet, in *Waiting*, the opposite holds true because the novel cannot separate itself from the Afterword's tone and language—its echoes can be felt throughout. In *Waiting*, the primacy of a deeply personal struggle means that the story of the nation is rewritten from the perspective of the individual.

In attempting to demonstrate that the desire for individualism is legitimate, *Waiting* works to redefine the relationship of the individual to the nation-state. Unlike Achebe, Habila sets forth the belief that the nation-state, in its ideal form, must facilitate the growth of the individual and not

---

<sup>178</sup> Habila, Helon. *Waiting*. p. 227.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p. 228.

<sup>180</sup> See Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. p. 120.

obstruct the pursuit of personal aspirations. In *A Man of the People*, Odili is constantly at pains to correct an unflattering public impression of himself after his humiliation by Nanga: “I suppose I wanted to erase whatever impression was left of [the] unfortunate if unintentional presentation of me as a kind of pitiable jellyfish.”<sup>181</sup> His inability to alleviate the effects of this humiliation emerges sharply when the crowd at Nanga’s political rally, so despised by Odili for its uncritical celebration of Nanga, expresses its agreement with Nanga’s blatant condemnation of Odili as a guileless, witless thief: “The roar of the crowd was now like a thick forest all around.”<sup>182</sup> Even though Odili claims that he holds the upper hand in judging Nanga from an “impregnable position,” the text’s comical depiction of Odili, “head turbaned like an Alhaji” in the hospital after he is attacked by Nanga, reinforces his pitiable state and the utter lack of respect he commands.<sup>183</sup> If *A Man of the People* frames Odili as the unenviable incarnation of the “pitiable jellyfish,” helplessly unable to assert his autonomy, *Waiting* triumphantly asserts the relocation of the vulnerable intellectual self in a domain that reaffirms the dignity and strength of the individual. It is, for instance, against this shift that Lomba’s child-like and desperate embrace of Janice may be explained. While weakness in *Man of the People* derives from an inability to counteract a rising tide of inauthenticity in light of individualistic desires, *Waiting* revalorizes this weakness suggesting, instead, that it illuminates the essential core of an inviolable right to self-expression.

---

<sup>181</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *A Man of the People*. p. 79

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. p. 140.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. pp. 140-141.

## Chapter 2: Imagining Global Struggle: The Violence of *The Beautiful Ones* (1968) in Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004)

Why must you mock, eh? It is simple. Choose whether you are me, de bird, or my broder. Only you can choose (Abani, *Graceland*)

Who is right at all? I know I have chosen something, but it is not something I would have chosen if I had the power to choose truly (Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*)

When Elvis, the young hero of Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), asks the streetwise King for advice about how to resolve a weighty "ethical dilemma," the King relates what Elvis views as another pointless anecdote.<sup>1</sup> Elvis must decide whether to strike out on his own by collaborating with Redemption, the young criminal mastermind who has ties to the Nigerian military state, or to never surrender his moral high ground. To choose the latter would involve attempts to make ends meet by taking on various menial jobs. Elvis lives in a Lagos slum with his dictatorial and layabout father, Sunday, who has failed to realize his dream of becoming a successful small-town politician. Although Elvis enjoys dancing for tourists on the beach as an Elvis impersonator, Sunday does not view dancing as work that befits a man from the Oke family. The King, a charming vagrant and man of the people, attempts to help Elvis resolve his crisis. He speaks anecdotally of his desire to resist his brother's oppression of the weak, symbolized by the caged bird. Insisting on the simplicity of the choices before Elvis, the King identifies three seemingly discrete identities whose rationale is rooted

---

<sup>1</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 96.



in communal resistance. Elvis, he claims, can overcome moral ambiguities by defining himself in relation to one of several ontological positions within the realm of social struggle: the social actor who is compelled to secure the freedom of others, the prisoner who is ultimately helpless to control his own destiny, or the most repressive force of all, the despotic state.

For the King, Elvis's choice is not so much a question of ethics as a matter of ensuring one's survival by forming strategic alliances. *Graceland* aligns Elvis with the helpless caged bird. Like the caged bird, the absence of solutions that would allow Elvis to resolve his moral dilemma means that all roads lead to one of two endpoints: the King or the state. Ironically, the King himself occupies each position in his proposed social framework. That is, he is equally a victim, liberator, and oppressor. On one hand, the King seems to work selflessly on behalf of the downtrodden who have also been denied freedom. On the other, the King is self-aggrandizing because he derives power from releasing the bird and willfully disobeying his brother's orders. While the King regards Elvis as an autonomous individual, capable of navigating the vicissitudes of slum life, *Graceland* repeatedly evokes Elvis's inability to exercise his own will freely without compromising his integrity. Therefore, although the King's anecdote suggests otherwise, the novel demonstrates that Elvis's ability to choose is merely illusory.

*Graceland's* literary antecedent, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), also grapples with the question of how to resist the harmful effects of crippling sociopolitical conditions while remaining committed to the promise of social regeneration. *The Beautiful Ones* offers a satirical view of life in post-independence Ghana. It depicts the emotionally barren life of the unnamed Man, a railway clerk whose resilience cannot withstand the overwhelming existential burden posed by the corruption of Ghana's leaders. Faced with the resentment of his family, the Man laments his inability to imbue the struggle against society's corruption with a belief in positive

gain that will eventually come to fruition: “[A]s if one could forever keep up the pretense that the difference between the failures and the hard heroes of the dream is only a matter of time.”<sup>2</sup> Evoking the aspirations of the independence struggle, the Man’s desire to reconcile the dream’s failed actions with the hard and, hence, unbreakable determination of the dream’s heroes speaks to the way in which the overt disillusionment of *The Beautiful Ones* belies a lingering investment in the utopian possibilities of the past. However, as the Man finds, the sheer necessity of survival in the present compromises the heroic striving of heroes. It is for this reason that the integrity of one’s commitment to the dream takes on a self-serving resonance in light of society’s impending collapse. As in the case of the Man, in *Graceland*, the pressures on the individual to survive necessitate Elvis’s adherence to a flexible moral code, which must repeatedly bend to accommodate the needs of others.

In step with its literary antecedent, *Graceland* seems to affirm the impossibility of choice in light of deterministic social conditions. However, unlike *The Beautiful Ones*, *Graceland* distances itself from a documentary-like representation of the people’s struggle with Elvis’s rather fortuitous departure for America. In doing so, *Graceland* swiftly and optimistically proclaims the freedom of individual choice. We must understand this seemingly sudden proclamation of choice in terms of *Graceland*’s self-conscious representation of the violence of the people and their day-to-day struggles. Violent “excess” characterizes this representation. It is a naturalist depiction of violence that is grotesque, voyeuristic, and often so habitual that it comes to define the novel’s hero, Elvis, himself. Elvis’s violence is out of step with the text’s fidelity to depicting the existential gravity of the people’s struggle. The inexplicability of Elvis’s violence produces a series of formal reversals that distract readers from Elvis’s patent inability to adhere to the developmental trajectory that celebrates

---

<sup>2</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. p. 45.

the emotional and moral growth of the individual in the *Bildungsroman*. The novel's need to legitimately secure Elvis's right to self-determination, in keeping with the upward mobility plot of the *Bildungsroman*, must be squared with the novel's elaboration of a questionable moral framework in which its protagonist fails, in a Kantian manner, to treat individuals as ends in themselves. This textual disparity creates a messianic universe that straightforwardly pits Elvis, as victim, against a rights-usurping state (the Colonel). Instead of a disjunctive occurrence, *Graceland's* ending is the culminating point in a series of systematic structural reversals that allow the novel to distance itself from the ethical implications of Elvis's violence.

Reading *Graceland* as a naturalist *Bildungsroman*, which purposefully adopts the representational strategies of Armah's *Beautiful Ones*—temporality and naturalism—in order to describe the life of the Nigerian people allows for a more accurate assessment of the terms under which violence is used as a representational strategy in the new African novel. In *The Beautiful Ones*, temporality and naturalism elucidate the ideological dilemma that confronts The Man. This ideological dilemma revolves around the following question: How to preserve the integrity of a self that secretly yearns for the possibilities represented by an inaccessible past within a society which, ruined by the failed promises of that very past, readily embraces the most debilitating aspects of post-independence modernity? Identifying the formal and genre-related facets of Armah's text illuminates the stakes attached to *Graceland's* contemporary recuperation of the ideological dilemma that marked the aftermath of the national liberation struggle in post-independence Africa: the successful presentation and legitimization of individualistic themes in a recognizable form.

## 2.1 The Form of Popular Resistance in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Graceland* (2004)

*Graceland* is considered a part of the grouping called new African writing.<sup>3</sup> However, it occupies an anachronistic position within the Anglophone African literature canon because it reproduces the formal elements that characterize Armah's representation of the independence struggle's aftermath. While conceding the similarity between the contemporary novelistic depiction of slum life and the early novels of postcolonial disillusionment, Ashley Dawson emphasizes the newness of the "novel of urbanization":<sup>4</sup> "To a certain extent, this tradition overlaps with the literature of postcolonial disillusionment; in some ways, it marks an alternative to this tradition in its emphasis on the experience of the masses rather than of elite intellectuals and in its embrace of popular genres and forms of expression."<sup>5</sup> However, Dawson's assertion that postcolonial narratives of urbanization, like *Graceland*, are committed to articulating the experience of the masses (a result, Adesokan suggests, of its need to meet the expectations of a global readership invested in crisis-ridden representations of Africa), downplays the way in which the popular genre conventions taken on by the post-independence African novel continue to speak to the trials and triumphs of an elite, middle-class experience.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, *Graceland*, in a manner similar to its early predecessors, foregrounds the pivotal nature of the people and their struggle at the same time that it self-consciously emphasizes the fraught nature of middle-class narratives of global mobility. The novel's

---

<sup>3</sup> See Adesokan, Akin. "New African Writing and the Question of Audience". *Research in African Literatures* 43.3: (2012). Adesokan notes that the label "new African writing" is "a reference to works of fiction written by mostly young African and market primarily outside the continent" (2).

<sup>4</sup> Dawson, "Surplus City: Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2009)," p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> See Kurtz, J. Roger. *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (1998), p. 45, as cited in Dawson, "Surplus City: Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2009)," p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> The most visible of these genres include the magic realist novel and *Bildungsroman*.

representation of violent struggle, therefore, cannot be understood solely within the context of an authorial commitment to engaging with the crises that afflict the nation.

Set in the urban slums of Lagos, *Graceland* paints a picture of a people whose fascination with the cultural commodities of the global West offsets the presence of vast material inequality. In *Graceland*, Elvis's daily fight for survival is merely a microcosmic instantiation of a global struggle writ large. Calling attention to the uneven power relations of a neoimperialist world order, the postcolonial critic, Neil Lazarus, proclaims the usefulness of a liberationist "Third-Worldist Fanon."<sup>7</sup> Instead of privileging aspects of Fanon's thought concerned with ethics and questions of personal identity, Lazarus views Fanon's anti-imperialist thought as the basis for understanding the neoimperialistic conflicts and economic crises occurring throughout the world today. It is, perhaps, this very shift away from a concern with individual identity to a preoccupation with a diffuse global terrain of material inequality that obscures the ethical difficulty of positioning a narrative of the individual into one of global struggle. Despite this conceptual incongruity, the critical conversation about *Graceland* advances Lazarus's vision of a Fanonian global struggle against neocolonial forces by foregrounding the importance of cultural resistance. In this discourse, cultural hybridity interrogates global consumer culture in *Graceland*. In "Cosmopolitan Solidarity," Chielozone Eze pinpoints *Graceland*'s investment in a "politics of transculturality," arguing that although the novel may lack the existential depth of Armah's *Beautiful Ones*, it compensates for this lack through its suggestion of a mode of resistance that depends on the nation's willing embrace of cultural hybridity and its firm rejection of ethnic chauvinism.<sup>8</sup> This, he notes, is a "narrative technique that reveals a lot about the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Williams, Patrick. *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. Eds. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh. New York: Routledge, 2010. p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> See Eze, Chielozone. "Cosmopolitan Solidarity: Negotiating Transculturality in Contemporary Nigerian Novels" (2005), p. 105.

author's refusal to pin down reality to a single way of understanding."<sup>9</sup> Eze's reading refutes the power of the global by calling attention to *Graceland's* depiction of cultural forms of resistance in the nation. In other words, Eze's fixation on the people's relationship to culture and the novel's refusal to present reality from a singular vantage point obscures the presence of a dominant, all-encompassing social narrative in the novel that reproduces a male-centric and monologic narrative of popular resistance.

In fact, *Graceland* reproduces this narrative of popular resistance by evoking the so-called "existential depth" of Armah's *Beautiful Ones*. Known for its stark portrayal of the nation-as-wasteland, the *Beautiful Ones* is best understood, Peng Cheah observes, as a nationalist *Bildung*.<sup>10</sup> The postcolonial nationalist *Bildung* deals with the challenges of collective self-affirmation in the post-independence era. Armah's early realist and activist novel is often considered the archetype of this nationalist literature of disillusionment. These modern African novels of disillusionment depict a corrupt leadership intent on preserving capitalist links with the outside world. This leadership, which is set in its ways, compromises the value of resistance as a potential mode of political liberation. In order to preserve a modicum of personal integrity in the face of parasitic political institutions, the characters in these novels are seen to strive, in frequently alienating ways, against the inevitability of the nation-state's ruin. Dealing with the process of collective self-actualization, Cheah observes that *The Beautiful Ones* and others that follow it "do not only reflect or thematize the nation's *Bildung*. They are themselves intended to be part of it. They are meant to have an active causal role in the nation's genesis insofar as they supply the occasion for the implied reader's *Bildung* as patriotic

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> See Cheah, Peng. In *Spectral Nationality*, Cheah writes that these novels "are concerned with the violence of national identity or the betrayal of the nationalist movement's ideals by the neocolonial state's political leaders and the indigenous bourgeoisie. They are marked by despair or at least a greater awareness of the vicissitudes of the protagonist's *Bildung*, which often ends tragically. Yet, they remain novels of nationalist *Bildung*, where their protagonists' lives parallel the history of their respective nations" (240).

subject.”<sup>11</sup> This process of readerly reflection, Cheah continues, would open up the possibility of national regeneration. *Graceland* highlights Elvis’s narrative of social maturation and personal conflict by adopting the social realist conventions of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. At the same time, it also actively seeks to relate a private story of the individualistic self to the novel’s public dimension—the people’s collective struggle for sociopolitical recognition. While *The Beautiful Ones* critiques the Man’s self-centeredness in light of the demands of collective struggle, *Graceland* suggests that a commitment to the nation threatens to negate the self. In other words, its evocation of public struggle merely confirms the volatility of the self instead of an external political reality. The private-public linkage that *Graceland* cultivates hinges on its fidelity to the nostalgic temporality and literary naturalism of *The Beautiful Ones* as postcolonial nationalist *Bildung*.

Demonstrating the formal richness of the realist novel, Susan Andrade points to *Graceland*’s innovative mixing of the conventions of the picaresque and *Bildungsroman* genres, which belong to the realist literary tradition. Andrade points to the way the final scene of Abani’s novel acknowledges the oppressive social and political conditions plaguing its characters while also signaling its commitment to the fate of one particular individual by rescuing its main protagonist in a “magical” gesture indicative of “realist failure or compromise.”<sup>12</sup> However, while Andrade rightly highlights the improbable nature of *Graceland*’s ending, I would like to suggest that the ending is not a marker of the novel’s failure to adhere to the demands of its realist commitment but rather a failure to justify its *hyperrealist* representation of violence. The text’s realism must be viewed less broadly in terms of its strict fidelity to the details of an external reality defined by socially and politically oppressive

---

<sup>11</sup> See Cheah, Peng. *Spectral Nationality*, p. 240.

<sup>12</sup> See Andrade, Susan Z., “Representing Slums and home: Chris Abani’s *Graceland*” in *Legacies of Modernism*, Ed. David James, p. 239.

conditions.<sup>13</sup> Instead, it must be understood in light of how this realist commitment is steeped in, and reliant upon, the text's continuous and rather intentional representation of hyperbolic forms of violence, which are connected to the articulation of the protagonist's rationalistic, and unapologetically individualistic, male subjectivity. *Graceland's* realism is not simply a function of the text's creation of realist effects: it is predicated on the hyperreality of such effects and the way in which such effects foreground the inescapability of private struggle. The text's hyperrealist depiction of violence, therefore, legitimizes the protagonist's exit from the nation. Because these effects originate in what is, ostensibly, a historically situated realism, I will treat *Graceland's* violence as the outcome of its deliberate reproduction of a naturalist aesthetics originating in Armah's singular representation of the phenomenon of arrested decolonization in Ghana.<sup>14</sup> This reproduction enables *Graceland* to affect a symbolic (albeit superficial) rapport with the plight of the nation while simultaneously legitimizing the need for personal salvation through a cathartic rapprochement with the global.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 239.

<sup>14</sup> See Jeyifo, Biodun. "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory."



## 2.2 Temporality and Naturalism in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* (1968)

In *The Beautiful Ones*, the Man turns to his old friend, Teacher. The Man hopes that Teacher will cast light on some form of redemption that will allow him to endure the pain and humiliation of life in the present. *The Beautiful Ones* highlights the people's disillusionment through Teacher's wistful remembrance of the past. The failure of Ghana's leaders to live up to their promises and the fear of succumbing to the lure of false hope once again causes Teacher to withdraw completely from society. Through self-imposed isolation, Teacher avoids the conundrum facing the Man: how to maintain, without resorting to social alienation, the truth of his convictions when society's corruption elicits his own material desires? Here, as with my discussion of *Graceland*, temporal logic refers to the thematic elements of the text that determine a character's perspectival orientation toward a particular point in time or influence the order in which events are presented in the text. In this case, the temporal logic of Teacher's narrative refers to the elements in the story that motivate his nostalgic remembrance of the past. On one level, the pain and despair of the present fuels Teacher's association of the past with the promise of spiritual renewal: "And even in the decline into the end there are things that remind the longing mind of old beginnings and hold out the promise of new ones, things even like your despair itself."<sup>15</sup> However, Teacher's remembrance of the past provides little solace. It amplifies his regret because it reminds him of his complicity in the destruction of the past's euphoric promise of renewal. Therefore, on a second level, Teacher's need to assuage his guilt through an understanding of how and why things went wrong motivates his nostalgic return to the past. What emerges from these attempts is a narrative of male victimhood instead of accountability.

---

<sup>15</sup> *The Beautiful Ones*, p. 62.

The naturalist aesthetics of *The Beautiful Ones* appear in the text's microscopic attention to society's moral and physical decay. Naturalism allows Armah to capture and critique the most oppressive aspects of political corruption. He does so from the position of a passive spectator. In an attempt to carve out a space free from society's ills, the Man, too, assumes a detached perspective that seems to afford the possibility of escape. Although it is meant to enable self-preservation in the present, this detached perspective reinforces his self-interest and, therefore, implicates the Man in the insidious culture of materialism and individualism that he seeks to escape (and which the novel seeks to critique). Therefore, naturalism in *The Beautiful Ones* emphasizes the Man's need to adhere to the dictates of a rationalistic masculinity.

### **2.2.1 Temporality**

In *The Beautiful Ones*, the shift from the Man's focalized narrative to Teacher's first-person narrative frames Teacher's monologue as a standalone unit. I read this section of the novel as such because it acts as an ideological roadmap, illuminating the novel's most pressing concerns through its nostalgic return to the past. Teacher's narrative, which deals with the lead-up to the anticolonial struggle, minimizes his own presence and coalesces, instead, around individuals whose experiences speak forcefully to the possibilities and challenges of social transformation: Sister Maanan, a spiritual guide, and Kofi Billy, a dock worker. Teacher's narrative opens up a space for the text's elaboration of two ideologically opposed gendered identities that correspond to a temporally bounded vision of the nation, on one hand, and the state, on the other.

Maanan, a symbol of natural renewal, represents the early idealism of the independence struggle because she is associated with the romantic possibilities of the nation's future. Although Teacher initially describes Maanan as a woman whose services to colonial men threaten her survival, the narrative optimistically relocates Maanan as a motherly figure who is able to pierce through the

decay of society to cultivate a harmonious relationship between the self and the outside world. While figuring the utopian hope and promise of social regeneration through Maanan, Teacher's narrative also signals the destructive effects of social struggle on the male members of the nation. Specifically, the story of Kofi Billy, one of the first characters to appear in Teacher's narrative, represents the male-centered trauma of a physically and psychologically disabling colonial past. The irresponsible actions of a British dockworker result in the loss of Kofi's leg. Kofi's inability to accept the loss of his leg causes him to commit suicide. In the novel, Kofi's suicide reflects the nation's collective inability to mitigate the effects of past injustices when faced with the spiritually vacant nature of the present. That is, it shows that Teacher's mental return to the past is dictated by his attempts to reconcile a notion of the communal self with the demands that self encounters during the turbulent period of postindependence. As Peng Cheah observes, the distrust of a teleological narrative of historical progress that appears in novels like *The Beautiful Ones* is reflected in "the wavering of the teleological time of self-actualizing reason" or, more specifically, a "nostalgic yearning for an unfulfilled promise that had existed in the past present."<sup>16</sup> While I agree with Cheah's assessment that the nostalgic yearning of the postcolonial *Bildung* reflects its distrust of a grand narrative of historical progress, I suggest that Teacher's narrative implicates him in the very same future-directed narrative that is set in motion by the neocolonial state. Although the impetus of Teacher's narrative is utopian in its preoccupation with a fleeting moment of spiritual regeneration, it illuminates the unsustainable nature of a spiritually attuned and holistic self, which is confronted by a competing modernizing current that conjures up the memory of the past's morally debased aspects. A rationalistic spirit of progress, which aims to consolidate the integrity of the fragile masculine self, defines Teacher's narrative.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cheah, Peng. *Spectral Nationality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. p. 245.

In Teacher's memory of the past, things done innocently and for physical survival take on a sinister hue. Looking at the past from the perspective of his younger self, Teacher remembers a group of boyhood friends who steal mangoes from the white men who live in shiny white bungalows on distant hills. Teacher's description of this childish exploit highlights the unseemly desire that characterizes the climb to reach the plentiful mangoes: "Mangoes hanging big and gold, and outside eyes looking and longing."<sup>17</sup> Knocking down "entire bunches of unready mangoes," the boys exhibit impatience that borders on greed.<sup>18</sup> At the same time that Teacher evokes the children's greed, he also points up their innocence. The boys race each other on the hill and take rides down the hills' gutters. Nevertheless, the things that the children desire evoke the unnatural. On the hills, the children encounter "the unbelievable smoothness of mounds of sand," which they identify as "the white people's playthings on the golf course."<sup>19</sup> The sand, which appears untouched in its smoothness assumes the status of an appealing yet frivolous material object. Similarly, the water that flows down the gutters on the hills takes on an unnatural quality because it "was always clean, like unused water, or like water used by ghosts without flesh."<sup>20</sup> This image of extreme cleanliness is contrasted with the lepers who use the water to bathe their sores before it reaches the mud at the very bottom. Like the boys who seek out the mangoes, the lepers' desire for the clean water reiterates their unwitting implication in the culture that oppresses them. Here, what is desired evokes both pleasure and the fleeting sensation of pain. The "sunshine feeling" that characterizes the playful trek up the hill becomes a "hurting inward dart of sunlight...bouncing out and away into coming eyes and vanishing again."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the act of fleeing the white men and leaving behind

---

<sup>17</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 67

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

the much sought-after mangoes, is equally painful: “[T]he hole is far too small and the thorns are cruelly sharp, coming through the khaki all the painful way into the flesh.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the danger that the black men who chase the boys with their whips and dogs pose, the boys look wistfully upon the mangoes that they have to leave behind and wonder “whether it would be worse to go back or to go home.”<sup>23</sup> The pain of confronting unattainable desires is tolerable given the absence of other means of fulfillment. The unsavory desires of the most vulnerable members of the nation means that it is not possible to view the nation in terms other than decay and corruption.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, Maanan helps the male members of the nation look beyond losses that seem to negate the self. In his narration of “Plato’s Cave,” Teacher points to the way the self becomes accustomed to the perpetual darkness of one’s environment over time, unable and unwilling to accept the blinding truth that lurks beyond the cave. Maanan directly facilitates the people’s movement out of the cave’s darkness into the light of self-awareness. Despite a desire to remain in the darkness, *wee* (weed), Teacher explains, brings the self into proximity with potentially unsettling truths. As Teacher tells it, Maanan’s weed has a revelatory function: “[I]nstead of blinding us the way spirits would have done, it took us years beyond our old selves and made us see so many miles beyond all those old points.”<sup>24</sup> Figured as a bringer of light, Maanan acts as a harmonizing force that opens up minds that have turned inward to events occurring outside the self and, crucially, to an understanding of how these events bear upon the self. Instead of encouraging their fixation with the past, Maanan uses weed to bring Teacher and Kofi Billy into the present moment. While opening the mind to old truths, the regenerative qualities of *wee* also serve to reveal what has gone unperceived. The giver of such truth, Maanan becomes a motherly source of guidance: “Kofi

---

<sup>22</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

Billy, always looking quietly at the place where his lost leg should have been, was like a child, asking Sister Maanan all the time to tell him what really was going to happen. Maanan only kept passing the burning wee from mouth to mouth and with a smile in her voice told us both to wait till we could tell ourselves the truth.”<sup>25</sup> Teacher’s smoking of *wee* positively asserts the concrete presence of his own body that is viewed as a coherent whole instead of a assemblage of continuously moving parts: “I looked, and was amazed to see that the fingertips were not visible as thousands and thousands of little fluid bubbles in motion, but as a calm exterior of skin covering bone.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of being closed off to his surroundings, Teacher is able to register the sounds and sights of nature: “Sounds, the mild thunder of the night waves hitting calmer water and the sigh of retreating afterwaves, now joined together with what we saw. The sand looked so beautiful then, so many little grains in the light of the night.”<sup>27</sup> The rootedness of self in an environment defined by the present moment and the connectivity of a body attuned to the dynamics of what was “going on inside and outside ourselves” gestures at the possible recovery of original conception of the self as whole.<sup>28</sup> This recuperation, however, is made possible through a self-imposed mode of forgetfulness because weed divorces the self from reality. Thus, Teacher’s perception of the concrete materiality of his body’s wholeness contrasts with the diametrically opposed reaction of Kofi Billy, which echoes Teacher’s unvoiced fears: “[Kofi’s] voice was not only close to me in body; but since I had thought what he said before he said it, his voice reached me as if it had been my own coming back to me from some strange place. The voice had said, ‘I don’t like it here.’”<sup>29</sup> Despite his smoking of the *wee* Maanan offers him, Kofi’s uneasiness is the result of his continued perception of the physical evidence of the

---

<sup>25</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. pp. 69-70.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

nation's decay. Even though Maanan, Teacher and Kofi sit on the breakwater, they cannot avoid the smells of human excrement that the air carries up to them. Kofi's continued perception of this decay, which points up Teacher's own doubts, highlights the oppressive nature of a restless modernity that impinges upon a rooted self.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, Teacher's narrative of the past implicates the nation in the shortcomings of its male members. Teacher calls up the image of soldiers who return to the Gold Coast after fighting for the British during the Second World War. Fighting in a war for a political cause and nation that is not theirs, the soldiers' victory is hollow because their sacrifices lack a clear rationale: "Whose victory? Ours? It did not matter."<sup>30</sup> Teacher shows that the soldiers' feelings of inadequacy, produced by their experience of war, are not consciously dealt with and, instead, temporarily suppressed through acts of violence. Instead of seeking to protect those whom they left behind and reinvest their lives with purpose, the soldiers turn on the colonized nation: "The anger came out, but it was all victim anger that had to find even weaker victims, and it was never satisfied, always adding shame to itself."<sup>31</sup> Although Teacher draws attention to the soldiers' self-destructive tendencies, his belief that the soldiers' victimhood is legitimate undermines his remembrance of the soldiers' moral depravity. Teacher observes that the soldiers are honorable in their attempts to provide for their families at home whom they believe will remain loyal to them. However, he suggests that the soldiers' wives submission to the material promises of modernity is simply inevitable: "What new thing is money if it is not to be spent?"<sup>32</sup> The soldiers refuse to accept the changed state of the world they left behind and, therefore, enter into a state of denial defined by madness and isolation in order

---

<sup>30</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 63.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

to mitigate what they perceive as the “keen knowledge of betrayal.”<sup>33</sup> While the colonial nation, figured in Teacher’s narrative as the soldiers’ disloyal wives, is supposed to provide a form of spiritual solace, it can no longer reassume its former pristine state. Similarly, Teacher realizes that he has not looked at Maanan within the context of the nation’s destruction because she has always appeared as a woman defined by her happiness and beauty. When Teacher sees Maanan in terms of her vulnerability, he is forced to confront his own insecurities about the role he (like the spiritually numbed soldiers) failed to assume in the struggle against the nation’s destruction by colonial forces. While Maanan is a woman empowered by her inner strength, Teacher views her as a woman whom he has failed to protect: “[B]ut in myself I felt accused by a silence that belonged to millions and ages of women all bearing the face and the form of Maanan, and needing no voice at all to tell me I had failed them.”<sup>34</sup> Ironically, Maanan, who represents the nation’s capacity for regeneration its spiritual reawakening, convinces Teacher and his friends to put their faith in Nkrumah. The instantaneous souring of Nkrumah’s promises, in the post-independence era, contaminates the hope contained in possibility of achieving social regeneration through the individual’s spiritual connection with nature because Teacher associates this possibility with Maanan.

The state, embodied by the slight figure of Nkrumah, gains its appeal by disrupting an ideal masculinity grounded in physical strength and overt displays of power. When Teacher describes Kofi Billy’s suicide, he emphasizes the “strenuous effort” Kofi exerts in order to “kick over a large upended brick underneath him.”<sup>35</sup> Teacher’s description of Kofi Billy’s suicide reflects a desire to preserve a physically able form of masculinity given that Kofi “loved to work on something with his

---

<sup>33</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 74.



strength.”<sup>36</sup> The fictionalized Nkrumah displays a controlled masculinity, which thrives on self-privation and moderation: “[W]hen he spoke, his words made him look even smaller, even weaker than he had looked at first.”<sup>37</sup> The weight and power of Nkrumah’s political message is not sustained by the continual assertion of a powerful physical strength but a self-conscious and controlled articulation of self: “There was a power in the voice that time, a power quickly retracted, and replaced by the low, calm voice.”<sup>38</sup> However, the text points up Manaan’s misinterpretation of Nkrumah’s minimization of his physical self and its desires as a kind of “helpless[ness]” that needs to be “look[ed] after.”<sup>39</sup> That is, while Manaan equates Nkrumah’s self-negating mannerisms with weakness that seems to correspond to an old debilitated form of masculinity, Nkrumah’s self-negation actually corresponds to a single-minded fixation with the success of a material reality beyond the self: “Then we can think...Then we will act....Today, when we say it, it is a promise, not yet a fact....Freedom!...”.<sup>40</sup> The form of masculinity embodied by the fictional Nkrumah imparts a sense of legitimacy to the inward-looking and progress-oriented nature of the rationalistic mind. Teacher’s narrative builds up a vision of the autonomous male self through its insistence on the stability that ensues from the unencumbered state of the unfeeling mind: Teacher “see[s] only growth . . . within [his] mind. When [he] can only see, when there is nothing [he] can feel, [he] [is] not troubled.”<sup>41</sup> Like Nkrumah, Teacher’s inward-looking posture exposes his resistance to all desire. The “grotesque” and “unnatural” physical state of the picture of the prematurely aged manchild that

---

<sup>36</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 85. As Philip Holden observes, Nkrumah’s autobiographical writing served to interrogate the colonial structures of thought complicit with the exclusion of colonized men from a modern, rationalistic vision of masculinity.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 85. In *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, Neil Lazarus speaks of the time-removed nature of the national independence ceremony. He explains that the power of the independence ceremony lay in its ability to symbolically dissolve social polarities, figuring progress solely through the achievement of resistance itself. For Ghana, this was a moment in which Kwame Nkrumah figured as the undisputed bearer of political modernity.

<sup>41</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 61

one of Teacher's childhood friends shows him emphasizes the rapid decay of Nkrumah's vision of progress while alluding to Teacher's equally unnatural retreat.<sup>42</sup> Teacher's physical nakedness and its asexual nature resonates with the "male voice, huge like a eunuch amplified" emanating from his radio, and shows that he has managed to invert the process of premature aging to a solipsistic state of infancy free from any nature-bound contingencies.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, he preserves the façade of an unpolluted nature associated with Nkrumah's youthful promise of national regeneration.

While Manaan seems to stand for the hope of social regeneration in *The Beautiful Ones* by celebrating the commitment of a young Nkrumah to the people, she also symbolizes a lack in the male narrator who is unable to identify his place in the struggle for the people's recognition. Her presence within the narrative serves to strengthen the antithetical relationship between a vision of the nation grounded in tradition as a natural and spiritually intuitive source of communal regeneration and a competing futuristic vision defined by the crippling modernity of the state. The text's representation of Manaan signals the problems that the fragile male self encounters, and the way in which the successes and failures of the promises made by the state during the national liberation struggle affects the consolidation of male integrity.

---

<sup>42</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

## 2.2.2 Naturalism

Literary naturalism highlights the presence of social or environmental forces that exert a deterministic force upon the individual. Naturalist writers seek to objectively capture the way in which social environments (particularly those defined by poverty, corruption and violence) constitute the individual and his destiny. In *The Beautiful Ones*, the Man's survival depends on engaging in corrupt dealings although he longs for an alternative. He must, in the naturalist scheme of things, submit to the pressures of his environment. The naturalism of *The Beautiful Ones* highlights the futility of the people's struggle to resist the oppressive conditions in which they live.

The Man, who is mired in modernity's grime, attempts to cultivate a detached perspective in order to control his base desires and emotions. However, the problem of how to negotiate the body's relationship to the undesirable aspects of the outside world affects the Man's ability to preserve an unencumbered sense of self.<sup>44</sup> In the novel, the decadence and corruption of Ghana's rulers is symbolized by the imposing structure of the Atlantic-Caprice hotel, whose blinding white color is intensified by the lurid "gleam" of the hotel's spotlights.<sup>45</sup> Located at the top of Yensua Hill, the hotel mockingly commands the attention of an oppressed people hungry for fulfillment. The hotel, as a symbol of material excess, parallels the uneaten mangoes of Teacher's memory, which simply serve to remind the people of what they cannot have. The text highlights the compromised nature of the Man's self through his inability to comprehend his relationship to the gleam for it "was getting harder to tell whether the gleam repelled more than it attracted, attracted more than it

---

<sup>44</sup> The text's libidinal economy emerges here; as critics have noted, the novel's Freudian undertones bring together the fragmentation of Ghana's political reality with the Man's own "profoundly divided consciousness" (Crehan 105). Stewart Crehan observes that the text's scopophilic and excremental metaphors register a division between the man's desire for self-control—a bodily separation from the decay and rot of the postcolonial state—and the acknowledgment of his unconscious, libidinal desires, from which he seems to derive a measure of power and pleasure.

<sup>45</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 10.

repelled.”<sup>46</sup> Although the culture of excess that the gleam symbolizes disgusts the Man, he is also drawn to the promise of plenty that it seems to extend. The decay of the Man’s external environment is all-encompassing. It inevitably merges with everything around it, including the Man’s own body: “He moved absently to the left of the staircase and reached for the support of the banister, but immediately after contact his hand recoiled in an instinctive gesture of withdrawal. The touch of the banister on the balls of his fingers had something uncomfortably organic about it.”<sup>47</sup> In this passage, the banister takes on animate properties that resist the limits of its concrete form when it merges with the Man’s fingers. The Man’s use of the public latrine also evokes the disintegration of barriers between the self and its physical environment. The latrine’s lights, “brighter than anywhere else” and which “mak[e] the cement platforms stand up like old monuments,” call up the blinding nature of the gleam and the towering height of the Atlantic-Caprice hotel.<sup>48</sup> While the Man positions himself on the highest latrine platform he can find above the excrement, the “air from below blow[ing] a cooling draft against his buttocks” betrays the pleasurable nature of his physical immersion in the dirt of the nation’s decay.<sup>49</sup> Above the dirt, the Man comes face to face with inscriptions that are etched in government color: “A small drawing of sex in an impossible Indian position, with the careful lettering: VAGINA SWEET. But just to the right of this there is something the Man has seen before without noticing its companion: MONEY SWEET PASS ALL.”<sup>50</sup> The drawing that the Man observes emphasizes a debilitating view of the sexual act in which physical fulfillment is framed as an unattainable object of desire. Indeed, the Man’s failure to please his wife by fulfilling her materialistic desires amounts to a failure of male power: “[I]nside the

---

<sup>46</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 105.

man the confusion and the impotence had swollen into something asking for a way out of confinement.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, when the drawing of tantric sex is viewed in light of the adjacent inscription, the possession of money is linked to sexualized power. In this respect, the inscription (“Money Sweet Pass All”) becomes an incentivizing appeal against the crippling nature of physical desire (a desire for human closeness), which reiterates the Man’s impotence. The sexualized power of money appears as a potential antidote to the difficulties posed by physical intimacy. Although the Man attempts to remove himself from the unsavory aspects of a debased modern existence, this retreat is equally compromising because it demonstrates his underlying attraction towards the gleam. Just as the Atlantic Caprice, which looms above the filth in which the people are enveloped, the Man’s suspension above the dirt of the latrine reveals his desire to inhabit a position of invincibility and, hence, power.

The Man wants to obscure the reality that he is mired in the nation’s decay. This brings about the Man’s repression of desire that emphasizes his sorrowful confinement in a reality beyond his control. In *The Beautiful Ones*, the Man’s insecurity derives from his awareness that the financial success of his friend Koomson is ill-gotten. The Man must decide whether to emulate Koomson’s corrupt ways, which depart from his humble beginnings as a railway worker. In the novel, the Man’s response to the sound of an old steam engine produces a sense of regret in the Man that mirrors Teacher’s consciousness of his own impotence in the face of rapid societal change:

From the direction of the yard the wailing whistle of an old steam engine came down the lines and disappeared...The sound brought with it a vague taste of sorrow which rapidly grew until the Man was asking himself questions that were no longer new to him but to which he had no hope of finding any answer...Why was it that

---

<sup>51</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 46.

just the solitary whistle of a train about to disappear down the deep distances of the forest should scatter in the air so much of the feeling of permanent sorrow? To the clarity of his famished vision had been added a sharp sadness as he rose ready to return. The dryness in his nostrils persisted, and there was no moisture in his mouth or in his eyes. The thought of food now brought with it a picture of its eating and its spewing out, of its beginnings and endings, so that no desire arose asking to be controlled.<sup>52</sup>

The Man's sorrow at the sound of the passing train represents his yearning for an honest yet outmoded way of life. The Man's inability to understand how to preserve the ideals of the past is highlighted by the fact that he can only hear the sound of the train rather than perceive its concrete form. The Man's sorrow forms a contrast with the "slight giddiness" that he initially experiences when he follows the tracks that "drove straight in clean shiny lines."<sup>53</sup> The Man's giddiness calls up his attraction to the gleam because the gleam emphasizes the Man's confusion about surrendering himself completely to the pleasures of material gain and the ideals of modernity. Against these fraught feelings of desire, the Man cultivates an ascetic perspective. For example, the Man's "famished vision" of the train revolves around "[t]he thought of food . . . a picture of its eating and its spewing out, of its beginnings and endings, so that no desire arose asking to be controlled."<sup>54</sup> The famished state of the Man's visual perspective links food, as an object of material consumption, to a process of inevitable decay. The perception of this cycle of decay, in turn, creates a physical diminution of appetite, which allows for self-control. The dryness of the Man's mouth also indicates his successful repression of his hunger for the gleam. The Man's desire for the gleam

---

<sup>52</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

is, therefore, submerged in a process of mental control that functions through the imagining of forms that balance one another out: ingestion and digestion. Here, eating—an activity associated with the experience of bodily pleasure and satisfaction—becomes a mechanical and prosaic process. Before he is resubmerged in the “darkness” of the railway Control Office, the Man “looks at all the things he had seen on his way outward with the same clear vision” that springs from an unfeeling interaction with his environment.<sup>55</sup> Although a desire for the gleam elicits an “ambiguous disturbing tumult within,” the Man’s clarity of vision is accompanied by “the satisfaction of a quiet attraction.”<sup>56</sup> In *The Beautiful Ones*, the Man’s ability to successfully repress the desire or physical hunger that comes from proximity to the gleam depends on his ability to cultivate an unfeeling state of mind.

The Man’s minimization of his self’s needs and desires diverges from the bodily excesses that loyalty to the gleam produces. As Teacher observes, the young Nkrumah displayed a weak exterior, which seemed to reflect a stalwart commitment to a lifestyle based on material privation. Contrastingly, the novel emphasizes Koomson’s transformation from a hardened dockworker into a politician who, eager to assimilate himself to neocolonial modernity, purposely feigns self-control in order to distract from his insatiable appetite and material greed.<sup>57</sup> From a distance, the Man watches Koomson interactions with a female bread-seller who works to get his attention. Koomson enacts his power through his emphatic but playful refusal of the seller’s advances:

“My own lord, my master, oh, my white man, come. Come and take my bread...”

“Mammy, I can’t eat all of that.”

---

<sup>55</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>57</sup> In its construction of a link between the nation and a female-coded conception of tradition, Nkrumah’s autobiography also sets forth an asceticism and rhetoric of self-discipline in line with the transformation of the party into the state—an institution that “domesticates . . . tradition through disciplinary action, much as the male body suffers ascetic privations” (323).

“So buy for your wife,” the seller sings back.

“She has enough.”

“Your girl friends. Young, beautiful girls, no?”

“I have no girl friends.”

“Ho, my white man, don’t make me laugh. Have you ever seen a big man without girls? Even the old ones,” the seller laughs, “even the old men.”

“Mammy, I am different.” The suited man pays the seller. She takes the money and holds on to the man’s hand, looking intently into his face now.

“You are a politician,” she says at last, “a big man.”

The suited man looks around him. Even in the faint light his smile is easy to see. It forms a strange pattern of pale light with the material of his shirt, which in the space between the darkneses of his suit seems designed to point down somewhere between the invisible thighs.”<sup>58</sup>

Against the claim of Koomson’s wife, Estella, that their fridge is full to the brim, the seller appeals to Koomson’s desire to emulate an image of masculinity that is rooted in the accumulation of material wealth. Koomson’s claim that he is different than other big men attempts to disrupt the seller’s association of social power with an excessive appetite equated with a potent male sexuality. Koomson’s assertion that he does not have any girlfriends is, therefore, a denial of his desire for material wealth. Framed in the terms of sexual desire, the seller’s discourse situates Koomson as a big man whose social status—a marker of viable male sexuality—is contingent upon his purchasing power. Indeed, it is not until Koomson pays the seller that she recognizes his elite social standing:

---

<sup>58</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 37.



“‘You are a politician,’ she says at last, ‘a big man.’”<sup>59</sup> This recognition echoes the approval of the Man’s mother-in-law who, in hostile resentment of the Man’s lack of consumer power, sits “lost in admiration of [Koomson’s] chubby profile” and “double chin.”<sup>60</sup> Unaware of the Man’s watchful presence in the shadows, Koomson’s smile demonstrates the pleasurable nature of the commercial exchange with the seller. The ghostly image of Koomson’s invisible thighs, which conceal his genitals, belies Koomson’s confidence in his sexuality. This form of disguise underscores the links between a corrupt economic power and a sexually potent masculinity. The recognition of Koomson’s power by the female seller reaffirms his sexual potency.

*The Beautiful Ones* emphasizes the Man’s alienation from other men through the shame and pain that he inadvertently inflicts on them.<sup>61</sup> The opening scene of the novel demonstrates that the corruption of Ghanaian society defines its poorest members. At the end of the day, a tired bus conductor accounts for his day’s earnings. He observes that the act of collecting his earnings is more satisfying in the days after his customers have been paid. The transaction gives the bus driver a sense of perverse satisfaction because he knows that his customers desperately want him to recognize their wealth. The bus driver’s power derives from his ability to refuse or grant recognition. As in the exchange between Koomson and the female seller, masculine power is granted through the sexualized exchange between giver and receiver:

[T]he conductor had not lowered his eyes. Instead he kept them fastened to the hungry eyes of the giver of the cedi, and fed them with admiration. He had softened his own gaze the better to receive the masculine sharpness of the giver’s

---

<sup>59</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 37.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 129 and p. 130.

<sup>61</sup> See Retief, Glen. In “Homeropticism and the Failure of African Nationalism in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*,” Retief reads the novel’s opening scene as one that represents several of the novel’s main themes—“the man as a passive watcher of other men’s corruption; the attractiveness of money for members of Ghanaian society; the physical distastefulness/marvelousness of the human body and the man’s isolation from his fellow men” (64).

stare. He had opened his mouth slightly so that the smile that had a gape in it would say to the boastful giver, 'Yes, man. You are a big man.'"<sup>62</sup>

The giver of the cedi desires the pleasure that visual recognition brings. The conductor adopts a homoerotic pose of submissiveness that reiterates the phallic power of the giver's stare. Thinking he is alone, the bus driver takes in the odor of the cedi notes. The bus driver's eager inhalation of the rotten smell of the cedi notes indicates the perverse nature of his attraction to that which is a symbol of corruption: "Again his nostrils lost the smell of the cedi's marvelous rottenness, and they itched to refresh themselves with its ancient stale smell."<sup>63</sup> The bus driver's immersion in the putrid smell of the cedi note forms a contrast with the Man's efforts to remove the smell of the latrine from his body. The conductor's sudden perception of the unblinking eyes of the Man disrupts the bus drivers' illusion of powerfulness. Pleasure is replaced with a sense of pain: "[T]he mere remembered smell of the cedi was now painful, and the feeling in his armpit had become very cold. . . . Vague fears of punishment drove their way into his mind."<sup>64</sup> The conductor's efforts to bribe the Man are not, as in the instance of monetary exchange, voluntary and, therefore, emphasize the forced nature of his submissiveness. Therefore, the conductor's realization that the Man is actually asleep provokes his rage because the Man has derived satisfaction from his humiliation: "[H]e saw, running down from the left corner of the watcher's mouth, a stream of the man's spittle. Oozing freely, the oil-like liquid first entangled itself in the fingers of the watcher's left hand, underneath which it spread and touched the rusty metal lining of the seat with a dark sheen."<sup>65</sup> On one level, the spittle that oozes freely from the Man's mouth emphasizes the Man's homoerotic impulses and the sexual satisfaction he unknowingly derives from passively watching the self-debasing actions of other men.

---

<sup>62</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

Although he rushes to wipe the shame-inducing moisture off his seat, the Man's spittle indicates his perverse appetite for that which he finds repulsive in his waking life. His passive response to the corruption of other men displays his implication in the perpetuation of a morally debased environment.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, the Man's efforts to help Koomson escape after the toppling of Nkrumah's government reveals the Man's submission to the pressures of his surroundings. The Man's interaction with the pitiful Koomson demonstrates the Man's desensitized state. He is unable to relate to Koomson's pain, thinking only of himself: "He thought with some surprise of his complete inability to get affected by the feelings and fears of the figure next to him. There was only the awareness of his own acute discomfort."<sup>66</sup> The lack of empathy that the Man feels reiterates his self-interest. The Man has no incentive to help Koomson escape from the new state authorities. However, the novel suggests that Koomson's complete debasement motivates the Man. As the Man observes, the change invisible on a communal level can be observed in the pain that awaits corrupt men like Koomson: "And for those like him who had grown greasy and fat...there would be pain ahead."<sup>67</sup> Certain of the inevitability of his pitiful demise, the Man gives Koomson the chance to escape through the latrine man's hole, which Koomson had initially refused to use on his visit to the Man's house. The Man must use force to push Koomson out of the latrine hole since the door to the latrine hole is locked: "Quietly now, he climbed onto the seat, held Koomson's legs and rammed them down. He could hear Koomson strain like a man excreting, then there was a long sound as if he were vomiting down there. But the man pushed some more."<sup>68</sup> The Man's awareness of Koomson's physical discomfort does not give the Man pause. The Man's encounter with the latrine

---

<sup>66</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 161.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 166.

man at his office points up the complete resignation of the latrine man who must numb himself with alcohol in order to carry other people's excrement: "Surely that is the only way for man to survive, carrying other people's excrement; the only way must be to kill the self while the unavoidable is being done, and who will wish to wake again?"<sup>69</sup> He is not fazed by Koomson's pain. The manner in which he helps Koomson exit the latrine displays his matter-of-fact perspective. The text's allusion to the debased work of the latrine man allows it to emphasize both Koomson and the Man's undeniable position amid the nation's excrement.

Considering temporal logic and naturalism demonstrates that the social contradictions of the post-independence period in Armah and Abani's texts repeatedly turn around the problematic formation of male identity with respect to the nation and the state. The feelings of regret that Teacher expresses with respect to the past are not primarily directed at a corrupt leadership's ongoing abuse of the nation. They reflect a need to assuage a sense of guilt and mitigate the knowledge of the self's impotence. Similarly, Armah's naturalism consolidates a picture of the Man's moral defeat. The Man's efforts to preserve the integrity of a self that is secretly intent on keeping pace with the demands of post-independence modernity is registered in the text's representation of an angst-ridden masculinity, which is often linked with voyeuristic and sadomasochistic tendencies. These compensatory gestures, which emphasize the Man's desire to sustain a coherent self, ultimately demonstrate his inability to divorce himself from the pressures of a progress-oriented modernity.

---

<sup>69</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 102 and p. 103.

## 2.3 *Graceland* (2004) as Naturalist *Bildungsroman*

The temporal logic of *The Beautiful Ones* illuminates the discrepancy between the characters' lingering commitment to the past's promise of spiritual regeneration and an equally pressing need to make the self cohere within a reality that demands, for its success, the self's departure from communal or holistic modes of self-expression associated with the past. The radical unthinkability of this departure brings about the Man's detachment from his surroundings, which seems to make life more bearable. Similarly, in *Graceland*, Elvis's inability to conform to the self-interested and materialistic demands of post-independence modernity produces his detachment. This inward turn is linked to forms of naturalist violence (sodomasochism and voyeurism), which emphasize his implicit adherence to the rationalistic conception of masculinity purveyed by his father.

*The Beautiful Ones* articulates the problems that attend the construction of male subjectivity through Teacher's mental return to the past. In *Graceland*, contrastingly, these problems are expressed through a series of structural returns to the past. These structural returns are, nevertheless, in keeping with the retrospective and nostalgic impetus of Teacher's narrative. In the first part of this section, I will consider how the presentation of events in Book I of *Graceland*, in accordance with the retrospective temporal logic of the *Beautiful Ones* as *Bildungsroman*, highlights the larger ideological tension that the text tries to resolve, rather precipitously, in Book II.<sup>70</sup> Ironically, what *Graceland* reveals, in its turn towards the past, is Elvis's own implication in the violent processes of rationalistic control associated with the seemingly indomitable Sunday. I will demonstrate in the second part of this section that Elvis's inability to justify or explain his own capacity for violence in

---

<sup>70</sup> See Abbot, H. Porter. "Story, Plot, and Narration" in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Ed. David Herman. Abbott observes, with regards to the distinction between story and plot, that while a story (a series of events proceeding in chronological time) can be narrated in different ways "so can it can be plotted in different ways" (Herman 40). The "artful disclosure" of story, denoted by the term plot, affects our perception of what would otherwise be a plain series of events (Herman 43).

light of a newly destabilized moral framework is the result of his father's sudden physical demise. This moral framework is used to reflect a clear oppositional relationship between the rationalistic and patriarchal masculinity embodied by his father and the communal, self-sacrificing ethos of the nation (figured through the characters of Beatrice and Efua).

### 2.3.1 Temporality and Naturalistic Violence in *Graceland's* Construction of Male Subjectivity

Reflecting its conformity with the backwards-looking temporality of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, *Graceland* devotes two thirds of the text to fleshing out the details in the story that precede 1983 as it alternates between 1983 and earlier periods of time. That is, most of the text details events in Elvis's life between 1972 and 1981, returning infrequently to the present. After the presentation of these details, the narrative quickly and completely returns to the story of Elvis's present-day life in 1983, a transition marked by the beginning of Book II. Although the choice to foreground the past for the greater part of the text is ostensibly a result of *Graceland's* adherence to the postcolonial *Bildungsroman's* retrospective temporality, this choice still raises the following questions: Why devote such a large portion of the text to the events of the story situated in Elvis's past only to move the text away from the past and fully into the present (and into what amounts to roughly a third of the entire text)? How do we read the later events in the story (the present) in light of earlier events (the past)? Insofar as the past casts a long shadow upon Elvis's consciousness in the present, the nostalgic temporality that defines Book I emphasizes the individual's attempt to withdraw from the socially alienating forces of the present.<sup>71</sup>

If we look to the opening section of *Graceland*, it is possible to identify the unanswered

---

<sup>71</sup> See Moretti as quoted in Summerfield and Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*. Moretti notes that the *Bildungsroman* also "prompts the hero and reader to look back toward the past," a move that is potentially indicative of the protagonist's maturity in that it signals an awareness of a closed-off future (107).

questions that motivate the past-oriented temporality of the *Bildungsroman*. As Menakhem Perry observes, the reader does not wait until the end of the text to process the elements it chooses to present. The reader, based on information received in the text, “organize[s] the so-far incomplete semantic material in the best possible way. He relates, links, arranges the information in hierarchies, fills in gaps, anticipates forthcoming elements, etc.”<sup>72</sup> Although *Graceland*’s commitment to naturalist aesthetics means that we get little if any sustained internal reflection from Elvis (beyond the intensely compacted thought-process that marks the novel’s closing pages), Book I works to pinpoint and emphasize Elvis’s central preoccupations. For example, when his father, Sunday, expresses his disapproval of Elvis’s lateness for work, Elvis “opened his mouth to answer but thought better of it.”<sup>73</sup> As I will demonstrate here, much of the novel is characterized by Elvis repeated refusals, implicit and explicit, to respond to Sunday’s provocations, choosing silence instead. It is this particular inability, on Elvis’s part, to say what needs to be said to Sunday that motivates the temporal order of the text. In other words, the narrative draws the reader’s attention towards the story yet to be told by creating various gaps and beginning near the end of the story (the novel opens in 1983). For instance, the reader is asked to consider: What caused Sunday’s downfall and descent into poverty? What was the nature of Elvis’s relationship with his father in the past? Specifically, the detailed narration of the past in Book I of *Graceland* foregrounds the construction of Elvis’s identity in relation to the patriarchal and traditional masculinity embodied by Sunday. Although Elvis attempts to resist this view of masculinity, the text simply reiterates the violence of this inward refusal.

*Graceland* situates Elvis’s transition into male adulthood with respect to the culturally

---

<sup>72</sup> Perry, Menakhem, “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings [with an Analysis of Faulkner’s *A Rose for Emily*].” p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 6.

sanctioned violence of the Igbo initiation ritual, which the novel casts in contrasting tones. On one hand, Elvis's unwillingness to acknowledge his participation in the execution of an eagle chick imbues the ritual, set in rural Afikpo, with a somber tone: "He did not want the blood touching him. He tried not to make eye contact with the dying bird."<sup>74</sup> Although Elvis does not actually kill the bird himself (he is too inexperienced), his elders attribute the act to Elvis despite his protestations. On the other hand, the gathered men enact a collective affirmation of male identity in harmony with the celebratory acts of singing and drinking. The figure of authority behind these ritual proceedings is Sunday. For Sunday, conformity with these proceedings necessitates a complete severing of Elvis's "apron ties"—a complete separation from a domestic sphere marked by his ailing mother and, hence, female bodily weakness.<sup>75</sup> The novel foreshadows the disappearance of the protective attributes associated with the domestic realm through the weak figure of Beatrice "leaning on a door-frame for support."<sup>76</sup> When Elvis questions the purpose behind the ritual of killing the eagle chick, his Uncle Joseph asserts that it "is de first step into manhood for [him]."<sup>77</sup> The seemingly momentous link between the eagle chick and the ritualistic performance of manhood that this "first step" signals is perfunctorily undermined when the eagle chick is shown to be a chicken. Here, killing is shorn of its ritualistic attributes and becomes a mundane part of affirming a unitary male identity: "'Do we have a kill?' they asked in Igbo, all speaking as one. 'Yes, we have a kill,' Joseph replied."<sup>78</sup> Seeking to distance himself from the unsettling evidence of his shooting of the eagle chick, Elvis's unwillingness to admit his participation in the killing of the innocent bird speaks to a larger inability to conceive of violence as a force that constitutes, or brings into being, a socially

---

<sup>74</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 19.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.



constructed view of the male self.

In *Graceland*, the female body becomes the locus around which Elvis's anxieties about his emergent masculinity coalesce. In the novel, Beatrice's motherly qualities are reflected by her connection with nature and its regenerative properties. The text highlights the connection between spiritual healing and the possibility of regeneration through the presence of Beatrice's recipes, which appear between chapters. While these recipes allude to the holistic and healing properties of an inherited cultural wisdom (the recipes are passed down from Elvis's grandmother, Oye), the text troubles the stability of this culture through the deterioration of Beatrice's physical health. Specifically, the surgical removal of Beatrice's cancerous breast, which she unsuccessfully conceals from the young Elvis, signals this physical deterioration. Stumbling upon the naked form of Beatrice after a bad dream, the young Elvis "saw the emptiness where her breast had been."<sup>79</sup> Juxtaposing Elvis's perception of his mother as naked with his fear and incomprehension at the sight of her scarred body, *Graceland* imbues Elvis's experience of the female Other (once a source of comfort) with feelings of lack and loss. Indeed, although Beatrice seeks to allay Elvis's fears by "plac[ing] his hand over the torn flesh," Elvis's touch results in Beatrice's pain.<sup>80</sup> The pain marked by Elvis's physical touch is contrasted with the pleasure Elvis derives from touching his cousin, Efua's breasts: "But this wasn't his mother, and this space wasn't blank...Where his mother's skin had the consistency of old, cracked leather, this felt more like the smoothness of taut mango."<sup>81</sup> In this scene, Abani carries over the image of cracked leather, which is previously used to describe the appealing texture of Beatrice's leather-bound journal: "He loved watching her write in it, and he would fetch it for her...thrilled that she trusted him not to look in it...[Elvis] lingered by the

---

<sup>79</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 39.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

nightstand, touched the journal, rubbing his hand over the cracked leather binding.”<sup>82</sup> While the aged texture of Beatrice’s journal once emphasized the sacred nature of the old and secret knowledge it contains, the cracked texture of Beatrice’s unsightly breast suggests decay and disgust.<sup>83</sup> The text frames Elvis’s perception of the female body in terms of a male sexuality that conflates the experience of pain (unwittingly inflicted on another) with gratifying sexual pleasure when it contrasts the decrepit body of Beatrice with the youthful adolescent body of Efua.

Elvis’s powerlessness, as a child, to protect his mother from illness is amplified in his failure to protect his cousin from physical harm when Uncle Joseph rapes her. Nevertheless, the text highlights Efua’s role, despite her status as female victim, in both producing and assuaging Elvis’s guilt. Figured as a silent observer of Efua’s rape, the novel works to capture Elvis’s moral duality:

Hatred and revulsion filled his nostrils and head, leaving a harsh taste on his tongue. But he felt something else too, underneath the reflex to retch. Little snakes of sensation crawled all over his body. And though he wanted to rush in and scream at Uncle Joseph, push him off and beat him to pulp, he watched instead, his breath coming in short rapid bursts.<sup>84</sup>

Beatrice’s physical vulnerability and her stoicism are mirrored in Efua’s rape: “Apart from the tears streaming down [Efua’s] face and the soft birdlike mews coming from somewhere in her throat, her face was impassive.”<sup>85</sup> The text highlights the simultaneity of Elvis’s disgust in the face of Joseph’s violent actions and his feelings of uncontrollable lust. Just as Beatrice’s pain becomes a source of perverse fascination and, subsequently, pleasure through his illicit desire for Efua, Efua’s physical pain is recast in erotic terms. As in the shooting of the eagle chick, Elvis assumes the position of a

---

<sup>82</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

passive spectator and becomes a complicit figure in the violence. Although Efua's psychological and physical vulnerability is rendered clearly by the text, she is also portrayed as a motherly figure, comforting Elvis and assuaging his feelings of guilt: "She seemed surprised by his tears and reached out her hand to wipe them away...she reached up and pulled him to her tiny body, all the while humming a lullaby softly under her breath."<sup>86</sup> The novel, therefore, sets up a connection between Efua and Beatrice as female characters whom Elvis is unable to protect yet who, nevertheless, offer themselves up as sources of maternal forgiveness and acceptance.

The scene in which Efua is raped highlights the text's association of male sexuality with an underlying if undesirable violence. Notably, the sense of moral shame that defines the closing moments of this scene reemerges in the next as shame that defines Elvis's own body in particularly dramatic ways. The carnivalesque setting of a magic show seems to provide Elvis with an outlet that lacks repressive rules of bodily conduct. Elvis is mesmerized by the gracefulness of the dancers who open the show: "Mouth open in wonder at the dancer's dexterity, Elvis moved his feet along in silent learning. Clumsy, he kicked up too much red dust and got clobbered on the head by angry bystanders."<sup>87</sup> Unable to properly coordinate his movements, Elvis's lack of precision makes him the victim of others' aggression. If Elvis was positioned as a voyeuristic spectator in the preceding scene, he is recast as the hypnotic object of interest of a crowd hungry for entertainment. In the next act, Elvis is singled out unwillingly: "Now Professor Pele go cut off dis young man's head,' the dwarf announced, pointing at Elvis. 'Den join it back again.' Elvis passed out."<sup>88</sup> This moment of spectacle emphasizes Elvis's complete loss of bodily control. Reprimanded by his grandmother, Oye, for making a fool of himself in front of the entire town, Elvis realizes that the loss of bodily control

---

<sup>86</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 65.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

could spell his mortal end. Overcome by fear, Elvis recalls the rich and respected rice trader, Mr. Jonah, whose family mistakenly takes him for dead after lapsing into a coma after a car accident. Although Mr. Jonah returns to his normal routine, he is deemed a non-entity and is viewed as a failure: “People walked straight past him on the road, eyes averted. He lost his business. His wives left him.”<sup>89</sup> The tale of Mr. Jonah, therefore, uses the image of bodily dissolution and self-negation to reiterate the possibility of becoming a social outcast: “Every day [Mr. Jonah] got a little more invisible, until one day he just faded away completely.”<sup>90</sup> The loss of body and self that is figured through the text’s objectification of Elvis’s body as violent spectacle inverts the subject-position Elvis occupies as the distant watcher of others’ pain. The specter of bodily dissolution emphasizes Elvis’s need to adhere to a physically and emotionally regimented form of rationalistic masculinity so as to preserve his integrity as a male member of society.

In *Graceland*, Sunday’s admonishments not only delimit the space that Elvis can comfortably inhabit as a man, but also reveal his desire that Elvis conform to a disciplined vision of masculinity grounded in bodily control. Dancing, however, seems to open up a liminal space of identity-making in the text that combines both freedom of expression with balanced physical movement. It allows Elvis to “commune” with the spiritual richness of a community in the past while accepting his place in an environment that demands stoic acceptance. Mr. Aggrey, Elvis’s dance teacher, suggests that he can learn to “float” like Fred Astaire by imitating famous male dancers. Dancing approximates a state of bodily suspension, which echoes Oye’s description of Beatrice who danced “[l]ike she was made out of air or a dream.”<sup>91</sup> In detailing the reaction of foreign tourists to his hypnotic dance routine, *Graceland* calls attention to Elvis’s capacity for bodily suspension: “It was spellbinding

---

<sup>89</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 67.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

watching him hover over the sand, movements as fluid as a wave.”<sup>92</sup> While Elvis’s clumsiness during the magic show may have compromised a cohesive vision of self, the clumsiness of a “Gargantuan Bell[ied]” American tourist is sharply contrasted with Elvis’s focused and precise movements despite his status as a consumable spectacle. Unlike Elvis who displays physical dexterity that alternates fluidly and self-consciously between states of stasis and motion, the American tourist who suddenly “fall[s] to the sand as his deck chair finally gave out,” is merely random “spectacle”—an object to be beheld.<sup>93</sup> The ritualistic aspects of dance are nowhere more visible than in Elvis’s covert observation of the amateur dancers in Mr. Aggrey’s class who are instructed to tie themselves to wooden crosses in order to “provid[e] the stiffer upper-body comportment required in formal dance.”<sup>94</sup> Eager to reproduce these controlled yet unburdened movements, Elvis watches the dancers waltz gracefully, “stapled to wooden crosses that pulled them upright and stiff like marionettes.”<sup>95</sup> While they “seemed to be quite happy,” the dancer’s restricted movements reinforce the way in which Elvis’s potential freedom is closely connected to his immersion in processes of bodily control.<sup>96</sup>

Elvis, through the controlled and purposeful movements of dance, resists the powerlessness of being unwillingly positioned as an object to be consumed as public spectacle. However, while he resists the vulnerability of this position, he is also complicit with the relegation of others to the status of spectacle. In *Graceland*, a fantasy of voyeuristic pleasure implicates the reader. Indeed, although the clinical gaze of naturalism feigns a lack of interest in spectacle, it is frequently turned towards spectacle—particularly the spectacle of the physical body.<sup>97</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that

---

<sup>92</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>97</sup> Holmberg, David Thomas. “‘A Strange and Ecstatic Pleasure’: The Voyeurism of the Naturalist’s Gaze in Frank Norris’s *Vandover* and *The Brute and McTeague*” *Studies in American Naturalism* 6.1 (2011): pp. 49-68.

Elvis's gaze settles on "happy, buxom women who carried cinder blocks on their heads . . . their fat shaking as they exploded in laughter," "masons with cement-dusted bodies" or young girls who "had hands of used sandpaper, the backs wrinkled, the palms scoured."<sup>98</sup> In people watching, Elvis connects with the seemingly mysterious or invisible life of the city's inhabitants as "he really saw the people behind the bodies that slogged through the day's work."<sup>99</sup> The attention of these images to the workers' physical attributes arguably presents them as fetishized objects that become framed within the terms of monotonous labor and local color: "What Elvis loved the most . . . was that there was always someone dancing. He would lie back and watch the dancers, a book open."<sup>100</sup> The self-imposed isolation associated with reading positions Elvis as a self-indulgent viewer, deriving pleasure from his surroundings from a distance.

Elvis's desire to frame the violent world of the city according to an aesthetically pleasing narrative manifests itself through his identification with the filmic reality presented by the Hollywood Western. The text presents Elvis as a Baudelarean flâneur who, despite his detached point-of-view, offers up aesthetically attuned observations. When Elvis encounters a shantytown under a flyover, he admires the "unflagging" energy of the resilient community: "He often wondered how he would frame moments like this if he were a director making a film. What shots would he line up? Which wouldn't make the final edit, ending up on the cutting-room floor?"<sup>101</sup> The Western film genre, in translating violent rebellion into a romanticized vision of "dar[ing] to try and make a living at something [you] loved" reframes existing conditions as a more palatable reality.<sup>102</sup> Yet, the Western, in its celebration of marginal male figures who rise above nature's unruliness and enact

---

<sup>98</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 28.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 147.

their own individualistic brand of justice, departs from the depiction of Elvis as a flâneur who, seeking to preserve a kind of existential security, stands aloof from a volatile urban crowd. Elvis's unwillingness and incapacity to create change in his surroundings is displaced through the idealistic form of intervention that the Western celebrates.

In *Graceland*, the prevalence of “archetypes [that] were flexible” in the Western—the transformation from “rogue” to “hero”—holds elusive promise for Elvis.<sup>103</sup> The symbolic economy of rogues and heroes appeals to Elvis's desire for a clearly defined but flexible moral universe. As Elvis remarks, in response to the peaceful air of the Anglican church: “There were no crucifixes here, no statues, only an oil painting of a brilliant sunrise over the altar. An uncomplicated relationship that he would not dare admit.”<sup>104</sup> Here, the text draws immediate attention to the painting of a “brilliant sunrise” that evokes the Western's promise of resolution and renewal that is not deferred to a spiritual hereafter but always imminent. Indeed, the Western's use of the visual tropes of dawn and dusk “reflects [its] claim to mythical timelessness, implying that the cycle of natural time overrides considerations of human or cultural time.”<sup>105</sup> However, in *Graceland*, the possibility of future regeneration that is seemingly inherent in nature or the Western's sunrise only finds its true expression within the religious realm of sacrifice—a human construct of the “here and now”—that takes the shape of the church's altar. Therefore, a moral universe unhinged from the cultural constraints of human existence and free from the imperatives of moralistic sacrifice cannot exist. Because of his own complicity in the text's violent events, Elvis cannot “admit” the possibility of an “uncomplicated relationship” between the moral self and the world he inhabits. *Graceland*, therefore, enacts a symbolic reversal that attempts to realign Elvis as the unwitting participant rather

---

<sup>103</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 147.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 197.

<sup>105</sup> Turner, Daniel Cross. *Southern Crossings: Poetry, Memory and the Transcultural South*. p. 8.

than conscious agent of such violence.

For example, the novel seeks to establish a symbolic parallelism between Elvis and Efua's rapes. However, it reveals the irreconcilability of their experiences when it signals Elvis's conflation, once again, of pain with sexual pleasure. The novel foregrounds a moment in the past when Elvis, along with several male friends, act upon homosexual impulses in an Anglican church. What begins as a scene of sexual adventure ends as a scene of bodily degradation with Joseph raping Elvis. Elvis and his friends discuss the sexual acts they saw in pornographic films. A reenactment of the films' taboo acts swiftly turns into a painfully detailed scene of voyeuristic "excess" for the reader, which, ironically, seems to evoke the erotic spectacle of the "blue movie" itself.<sup>106</sup> When Obed suggests that they "experiment on each other," Elvis's desire to participate is shown in the text's indication that "he wasn't as vocal as the others in his protests."<sup>107</sup> However, when met with Joseph's "huge erect penis" that is alternately figured as a "twitching cobra ready to strike" and a "stick of sugarcane," Elvis becomes "zombielike" and completely devoid of the desire to act.<sup>108</sup> Elvis's zombielike state diverges sharply from the exuberance that so clearly defines his earlier sexual experience: "As the afternoon wore on, they became a little more adventurous and were soon down to their underwear, then nothing."<sup>109</sup> The experience of pleasure that is vaguely taboo is suddenly imbued with sadomasochistic undertones when Joseph rapes Elvis.

Furthermore, while Efua is devoid of any real subjectivity given that "her face was impassive," Elvis's rape betrays a clear interiority.<sup>110</sup> Elvis's interiority is evinced through the reemergence of the text's trope of bodily annihilation: "With a shudder, Elvis remembered Titus's

---

<sup>106</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 196.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* p. 196.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 197-198.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p. 197.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.



story about the woman who sucked the man's soul out. That would make him a vampire, Elvis thought, and that was for some inane reason more frightening."<sup>111</sup> Initially, the threat to Elvis's self-autonomy is figured as inevitable through the "warm rust of his blood mixing with the man's musk" but, subsequently, as the impetus for the self's disentanglement from the oppressive confines of the physical body: "When he opened his eyes, he was on the ceiling looking down on their bodies spooned together."<sup>112</sup> Moreover, the little detail we receive about Efua's physical pain ("tears stream[ed] down her face" and "soft birdlike mews [came] from somewhere in her throat") is contrasted with the painfully detailed scene of Elvis's prolonged bodily subjection to brutalizing, pornographic violence: "The man slapped him hard again, stunning him," "a burst of fire ripped him in two," and "[t]he pain was so intense, Elvis passed out."<sup>113</sup> Finally, the violence of this scene moves beyond that used to characterize Efua's rape while maintaining Efua's position as a constant source of motherly consolation: "Sssh, it's not your fault," she whispered."<sup>114</sup> Like Beatrice whom Sunday characterizes as "touched," Efua, despite her physical weakness, reappears as a figure of spiritual salvation. She emerges faintly in the doorway after Elvis "will[s] Jesus to reach out of the sun and heal him."<sup>115</sup> The text's repeated emphasis of Efua's boundless sympathy calls attention to Elvis's inability to rationalize his own complicity in her rape.

Elvis's wish to rationalize his passive participation in Efua's rape results in his identification with another passive participant, the Biafran child-soldier, Innocent. When Elvis serves as an interlocutor for Innocent, who relates his own story of violence to Elvis, the text figures Innocent as a projection of Elvis's own internal spiritual conflict. Innocent tells Elvis of the atrocities he

---

<sup>111</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 198.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 198.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p. 198.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 186 and p. 198.

experienced under the leadership of Captain, the teenage commander of the Biafran Army's Boys' Brigade. He recalls the Captain's violent rampage through a Catholic church that has already been destroyed by state forces. In his story, Innocent conveys his wish to survive. Through Innocent's mental recitation of a religious hymn, the text identifies Innocence with the Lamb—a symbol of regeneration and Christ himself: "A sloughed-off fragment of another hymn popped into Innocent's head, the words flooding: 'Are you washed in the blood, in the soul-cleansing blood, of the Lamb?'"<sup>116</sup> Innocence's struggle to maintain his moral integrity in the face of ungovernable forces of social evil emphasizes his victimhood. Captain's antagonistic behavior, and his singling out Innocent as an object of scorn and ridicule, mirrors the Colonel's inexplicable penchant for bullying Elvis (the Colonel accuses Elvis of willfully encroaching on his personal space in a night club). Foregrounding the escalation of senseless violence, the scene implicates Innocent in Captain's rape of two nuns: "Innocent had watched, afraid to intercede, afraid of what Captain would do to him. He stared into the nun's eyes that were as grey as a fading blackboard."<sup>117</sup> This paralyzing fear calls up Elvis's response to Efua's rape. However, at the heart of Innocent's narrative is the revelation that there is nothing that is inherently right or wrong because "the lines kept shifting."<sup>118</sup> There is, additionally, no room for idealism within the desecrated Catholic church: "the whitewashed stones" are stained with "dried blood, like teeth stained with pink dental dye."<sup>119</sup> Similarly, the "stench of roasted [corpses], not nauseating, but actually mouthwatering" silently mocks Innocent's refusal to eat the human-like monkey that the Boys' Brigade shoots, and which is the group's only source of sustenance.<sup>120</sup> The miraculous preservation of the altar in the burned-out church reaffirms the

---

<sup>116</sup> Abani, Chris. p. 211.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p. 210.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p. 210.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p. 211.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p. 213.

possibility of Innocence's redemption. Here, the "harsh sunlight" filtering through the stained-glass window behind the altar physically transforms his body into "a patchwork of color."<sup>121</sup> Once again, the trope of the Western's sunrise enveloping Innocent's body in the church, signals the possibility of moral regeneration within a degraded reality that lacks a visible end. By staging Elvis's traumatic experience of violence within the larger sociopolitical reality of war, the text links the revelatory properties of Innocence's confessional narrative with Elvis's desire for personal redemption. In doing so, it attempts to provide an explanation for Elvis's position within a deterministic framework of violence. Here, war as an intrinsically violent political reality becomes a container in which the ambiguous implications of Elvis's violence as an individual are diffused.

The promise of regeneration associated with the mutable quality of Innocence's immoral past is contrasted with the text's description of Sunday's steady patriarchal demise. Sunday's efforts to win the local elections are derailed when he refuses to resort to the corrupt tactics used to win over voters by his rival, Chief Okonkwo. Although this failure is ostensibly the result of Sunday's unwillingness to abandon a traditional ideal of male honor, the text highlights Elvis's fixation with Sunday's immoral acts. For instance, in his confrontation with Sunday about his cousin Godfrey's death, Elvis emphasizes Sunday's moral shortcomings. Here, the severity of Elvis's sin of omission seems to lessen in light of Sunday's intransigent belief in the rationality of violence committed in the name of the greater good. Killing Godfrey, the family troublemaker, Sunday believes, prevents criminality from being associated with the family name and protects Elvis's sole inheritance: the patriarchal identity represented by his own name, Oke. While Elvis demands that Sunday recognize his complicity in the acts of violence committed in the past, this demand does not result in Elvis's own rigorous self-inspection either. Indeed, Elvis's silence about Joseph's repeated abuse of Efu

---

<sup>121</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graveland*. p. 214.

and his role as silent bystander marks his own complicity in her victimization. Although he expresses his knowledge that Uncle Joseph raped Efua, he does not place himself at the scene: “He couldn’t tell his father that he had seen it happen. Not once, but several times. Nor could he tell him that it had started a long time ago. . . . That would mean having to explain why he had never brought it to his father’s attention before now.”<sup>122</sup> Rather than set Elvis up as heroic, this scene demonstrates that Elvis and his father have committed crimes that merely differ by degree. Indeed, Elvis does not speculate about Efua’s whereabouts in the present and the effects of this trauma are not a part of a recognizable process of social maturation. Because Efua remains absent from Elvis’s reflections in the present, his disclosure of his own rape—not Efua’s—to Sunday belies self-interest for it returns the narrative to the problematic status of male integrity. Ironically, Elvis’s suggestion that Sunday’s failure as a man is the result of an inability to appease his guilty conscience mirrors the image of Elvis that the text creates.

Book I of *Graceland* ends on an ambiguous note as we close with an image of Sunday struggling to fathom the trajectory of his own demise. This tone of uncertainty, which is also present in Elvis and Sunday’s final confrontation about Uncle Joseph’s abuse, defines the thematic landscape of Elvis’s life in Lagos and, thus, the here and now of the story. The similarities that emerge between Elvis and his father, which suggest not only Elvis’s guilt but also Sunday’s failure, produce this uncertainty. Sunday’s failure, in turn, compromises Elvis’s ability to view his father as a representative figure of rationalist masculinity. As if to heighten this uncertainty, the final sections of Book I foreground moments of potential reconciliation between Sunday and Elvis through Sunday’s expression of concern for Elvis’s future and Elvis’s apparent empathy for Sunday’s shame at his loss of male honor. The story that the text presents about Elvis’s relationship with his father in Book I

---

<sup>122</sup> Abani, Chris. p. 144.

does not provide the reader with a conclusive image of Sunday's true nature. As the text returns to the present-day events of the story, the narrative makes it increasingly difficult to clearly assess Sunday's character: is he a hero or a villain? Similarly, it asks, how could a commitment to upholding a patriarchal vision of masculinity possibly result in failure? Indeed, it is Elvis's very inability and unwillingness to sustain this commitment to this traditional conception of masculinity—reflected by his skepticism toward Sunday's epic bid to successfully rebuild the slums of Maroko—that motivates the quick paced resolutions of Book II.

## 2.4 Apocalyptic Fantasies: Messianic Struggle, Patriarchal Failure, and Torture

*Graceland's* production of hyperbolic forms of violence is naturalized through the novel's compression of story events in the latter half of the text. The novel devotes little space to the explication of story events in Book II. This compression allows the novel to sustain its fidelity to both the ideological and temporal exigencies of the *Bildungsroman's* upward mobility plot, which values self-improvement and a quick-paced, forward momentum. First, *Graceland's* narrative of national struggle becomes increasingly male-centric in its attempts to preserve a fragile male ego. The idea of struggle is primarily a private struggle to save oneself from the degenerate aspects of the nation. Second, the need to symbolically realign Elvis's male subjectivity with a tacit commitment to the nation and, thus, the people, begets a hyperbolic violence. This hyperbolic violence allows the text to conflate Sunday's violence with the violence of the state. Creating a placeholder for the ethical ambiguities of the novel as a whole, the text's representation of the state as a monumental evil prevent the novel from advancing a substantive political critique.

### 2.4.1 Redemption and Messianic Struggle

*Graceland* characterizes Elvis's relationship to his urban surroundings in terms of a cosmic struggle for personal rather than collective salvation. The street-smart Redemption and the revolutionary-minded King of Beggars are both peripheral figures in society who occupy the center of this struggle. Redemption and the King guide Elvis through an unfamiliar terrain that forces him to adopt their survivalist ethos. Elvis's dilemma revolves around the need to choose between two seemingly distinct ideological camps, which are, at root, morally ambiguous. On one hand, Redemption stands for the fluid morality of the Western, acting in terms of sheer practicality and refusing a universally recognizable code of social morality. On the other, the King holds up the fundamental goodness of the people who must be protected at all costs from the tyranny of military forces represented by the Colonel.

Redemption, who encourages Elvis to drop out of school and cater to his own needs, stands for the value of rugged individualism in the novel. Although Elvis is aware of Redemption's quick fix solutions, which usually rely on an illicit system of material exchange, this awareness is muted by the fact that Redemption consistently secures Elvis's well-being. Observing that Elvis is constantly at odds with his father, Redemption privileges a non-confrontational mode of existence grounded in self-interest in which Elvis, paradoxically, "must start thinking beyond [his] guns."<sup>123</sup> The suggestion here is that Elvis must adopt a position that does not fixate on superficial grievances that distract him from more pressing issues like living life in the present. He must, in other words, move beyond time-wasting reactions to his father's antagonistic gestures and focus on himself: "See you spend your whole life fighting with your father and no time on making your own life."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, by

---

<sup>123</sup> Abani, Chris. p. 53.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

“thinking beyond [his] guns,” Redemption avoids all confrontation and adopts a pragmatic approach to survival. Redemption obediently follows the Colonel’s commands and creates a diversion that saves Elvis from the Colonel’s wrath. Nevertheless, while Redemption’s survivalist and non-confrontational creed seems to offer Elvis a promising way of separating himself from Sunday’s stifling view of male identity, the violence of an unfeeling rationalistic self is a characteristic of Redemption’s world as well. When Redemption sets Elvis up with a job that will allow him to make money from dancing, Elvis takes on the role of an escort who is paid to dance with the wealthy patrons of a nightclub in Lagos. While Elvis is permitted to move his body freely through dance, he must resist the urge to express his desires on an emotional level. Once again, the text creates a doubling effect in which Elvis’s first customer, Rohini, the daughter of a self-made Indian businessman, reveals that she, too, fights with her father. Although Elvis states that this feeling is mutual, Rohini fears that Elvis’s observation is “awfully personal.”<sup>125</sup> Here, Elvis’s desire to make things personal, through conversation, implies that Elvis’s desire to involve himself emotionally makes him less of a “disposable” commodity, thereby disrupting a deterministic hierarchy of social relations in which both Elvis and Redemption’s survival is guaranteed.<sup>126</sup> Elvis must sell his body *qua* body—Rohini is not interested in Elvis as a person. Elvis is eager to cater to Rohini’s needs. However, when Elvis offers to buy her a beer, Rohini takes offense at the implication that they are social equals: “I think you’ve got it wrong...It is I who buy the drinks.”<sup>127</sup> In one fell swoop, Rohini gestures at Elvis’s empty assertion of autonomy, reestablishes her place within the hierarchy of Lagos’s nouveau riche, and announces its all-encompassing purchasing power.

As Elvis quickly discovers, Redemption’s ability to keep them both afloat is a function of his

---

<sup>125</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 93.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

links with the Colonel, the nature of which Elvis would rather not know: “Absently he wondered how Redemption knew the Colonel, but was afraid to ask in case he found out.”<sup>128</sup> Indeed, despite the text’s clear identification of the Colonel’s links to the global organ trade, Redemption’s links to the Colonel are largely obscured. Redemption’s trafficking of cocaine and his procurement of an American visa are simply related to his ability to use his connections without any hesitation. Nevertheless, these nebulous connections allude to one undeniable source: the Colonel. Redemption’s social dexterity is ultimately a function of his ability to communicate the deferential language of the state. Redemption does not conceive conflict in terms of definitive terms like “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad.” For example, while working the club, Elvis unintentionally bumps into a heavily medalled dancing soldier (the Colonel). Redemption views Elvis’s apology as a sign of guilt. Redemption distances himself from Elvis’s “diplomatic approach” by eschewing all notions of morality in order to ensure their survival.<sup>129</sup> Instead of assigning blame to Elvis, Redemption reinforces the monolithic power of the state. For example, when Redemption explains Elvis’s careless behavior in terms of his “bush mentality” and ignorance, Redemption evokes Elvis’s stupidity and inferiority: “He is confuse, sir, Forgive, sir. I beg.”<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Redemption minimizes the threat that Elvis’s agency seems to pose to state power by reinforcing Elvis’s inherent weakness and the Colonel’s masculine power. Redemption frames the Colonel as a “big man” whose importance renders Elvis insignificant in the bigger scheme of things: “Don’t waste your time on his type.”<sup>131</sup> In the same way that Elvis’s dance partner hungrily “devour[s]” and “completely enfold[s] him,” the Colonel exudes an uncontrollable urge to “open him up like a choice cut of

---

<sup>128</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 122.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p. 120.



beef,” causing Elvis to “[wonder] why he was being man-handled so much.”<sup>132</sup> This lack of bodily control is echoed by the Colonel’s ability to enforce a regime of mental control: “The six soldiers seemed controlled by a collective mind and stopped in front of the Colonel, saluting.”<sup>133</sup> This robotic response echoes Redemption’s own scripted behavior. The scripted movements that Redemption rehearses perpetuate a fluid morality, which Elvis contests when he denies his unjust implication in the conflict: “What did I do wrong, anyway?”<sup>134</sup> In Redemption’s scheme, independence comes at a price: the loss of self-respect.

While Redemption appeals to Elvis’s desire for a way of life that privileges individuality, the King holds up an equally enticing vision of communal solidarity. For instance, while the world of film in Redemption’s mind represents the imaginative construction of an idealized self unencumbered by moral barriers, the King views film as a means to gaining a moral education that cultivates group-oriented consciousness. For the King, Elvis’s education involves a rejection of a purely self-interested position for a way of life that recognizes that “people are important.”<sup>135</sup> In place of Redemption’s eager embrace of a mode of self-advancement synonymous with getting a lucrative movie deal in the United States, the King turns back resolutely towards the past “where the good of the group was placed before individual stake.”<sup>136</sup> Here, the text casts a nostalgic glance towards the ritualistic forms of group identity that characterized Elvis’s initiation into a patriarchal society, thereby foregrounding the circularity of Elvis’s education. This education emphasizes the importance of following the often-violent lead of elders who seem to act on behalf of the community and tradition. Although the King gestures to the possibility of effecting social equality,

---

<sup>132</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 119-120.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* p. 134.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* p. 155.

the King stands firmly at the helm of this communal grouping: “[The King] gaz[ed] down at his subjects, his domain.”<sup>137</sup> Communal regeneration is not carried out on a plane occupied by equals but is determined by the decisions of one charismatic individual.

*Graceland* moves to unsettle the distinction that the King makes between personal gain and the common good. Elvis learns that the King’s desire to reap justice for the people is a product of his desire to seek revenge on the Colonel, who killed his family, and gain social control. Listening to the speakers in Freedom Square, the King encourages Elvis to listen to a speaker who evokes the people’s accountability for their own precarious futures. Asserting that the people live in a prison of their own making, naively “celebrat[ing] the replacement of one despot with another” and allowing them “to play us like fools, buying off our allegiance with money,” the speaker excites the crowd by framing reality within a sharply delineated moral economy of right and wrong.<sup>138</sup> Tellingly, it is only when the speaker attributes this vision of morality to his own plans to incite a mass revolt that the King’s enthusiasm wanes: “‘Let us move away,’ the King said. ‘He is getting carried away, and de army go soon come.’”<sup>139</sup> Yet, although the King seems to fear the repercussions of the people’s rebellion (his loss of power), he readily confronts the Colonel, his nemesis, in an epic battle for social control. This epic battle calls up the “simple” plot lines of the Western that celebrates “the eternal struggle between the good of John Wayne and the evil of the villain. . . Actor.”<sup>140</sup> For instance, the King and the Colonel assume their scripted positions as the television cameras record them: “‘Before the Colonel could release his pistol, the King sprang and sunk his knife deep into the Colonel’s throat.’”<sup>141</sup> The King’s violent actions evoke the Western’s ideal of retributive justice.

---

<sup>137</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 116.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p. 302.

Significantly, the King's actions are defined by a bloodthirsty volition as well as the intervention of greater heavenly forces: "a hand reached down from heaven and handed him a sword with which to smite the unjust army."<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, his actions are divested of their ambiguity when they are captured on screen: "when the film of the King jumping the Colonel and stabbing him was broadcast, he [was] deified, turned into a prophet, an advance guard, like John the Baptist, for the arrival of the Messiah."<sup>143</sup> The filmic renarrativization of the King's encounter with the state dispels any trace of odious intent by casting his struggle in a beatific light.

Previously known as "Master" to boys like Redemption who begged for him, the King's relationship to the people is implicated in an insidious system of exchange none too distant from the "perverse morality based on commercial value" that he straightforwardly condemns.<sup>144</sup> Elvis is, once again, figured as disposable actor—a fact reiterated in Sunday's warning to Elvis that King is merely "speaking through [him]" for self-interested purposes that only seem to reflect a clear moral register.<sup>145</sup> Therefore, although Redemption and the King seem to represent different paths to salvation, the text blurs the line that distinguishes them. Both Redemption and the King provide Elvis with a superficial sense of security (a deficient factor in his relationship with Sunday) in order to cultivate respect and loyalty. Although each seems to provide an alternative to the culture of submission represented by Sunday, each also displays a dubious sense of morality. While Redemption treats Elvis as an equal counterpart by actively including him in the organization of their illicit dealings, he demands that Elvis acknowledge his subservient place within a larger chain of command: "Redemption trail[ed] Elvis behind him like a leashed dog."<sup>146</sup> Similarly, although his

---

<sup>142</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 302.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* p. 303.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* 155.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 205.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 238.

power is tenuous, the King adopts a top-down framework of authority in which charismatic forms of leadership and the idealization of the people (as a group whose moral integrity must be preserved) create new spaces from which to exercise power. On one level, Elvis's identity within this network of power is hardly determinate, for he oscillates continuously between that of the naïve victim and willing accomplice. Secondly, these inconsistencies illustrate Elvis's inability to locate an ethical framework that is not in some way compromised.

#### **2.4.2 Patriarchal Failure**

The novel compresses the story events of Book II, which are set in 1983, into a space that comprises roughly a third of the entire novel. Here, the compact nature of the text, which deals entirely with a quick succession of events that lead up to the end of the story, reflects the novel's need to resolve the problem of Elvis's violence. Abandoning all nostalgic turns to the past, Book II deals largely with the "cumulative effect of all the horror [Elvis] had witnessed" given that "there was only so much a soul could take."<sup>147</sup> The "cumulative effect" of Elvis's experience of violence in *Graceland* corresponds to Elvis's ineradicable sense of guilt regarding Efua's rape. Several acts of vigilante justice find Elvis transfixed by the inhumanity of the act yet unable to intervene because these acts do not provoke his empathy. Book II reveals Elvis's increasing self-interest.

As Redemption observes, Elvis's inclination toward moral judgment (which falls equally upon Sunday, Redemption, and the King) fails to come full circle as a critical evaluation of his own ethical standards. The escalation of violence in the text is apocalyptic in the sense that it foreshadows the compromising resurfacing of what has lain beneath the surface: Elvis's ineradicable guilt. For instance, a violent crowd's stoning and burning of the carpenter, Jeremiah, reflects a cannibalistic spirit of misdirected justice in Elvis's mind: "There was something comically biblical, yet purely

---

<sup>147</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 228.

animal, about the scene.”<sup>148</sup> This lawless cannibalism extends back into the past, calling up Sunday’s act of killing Godfrey, who steals and gets into fights, in order to preserve the family’s honor. As in the case of Godfrey, it is not clear to Elvis whether Jeremiah is guilty or innocent. Redemption’s response to Elvis’s questions illustrate this ambiguity: “Is he a thief? . . . Or is he a carpenter? . . . Which One?’ ‘Either. I don’t know and I don’t care.”<sup>149</sup> In its depiction of senseless brutality, this scene reproduces Elvis’s fear that the anonymous crowd might enact such violence upon him. The crowd disregards Jeremiah’s attempts to humanize himself by repeating his name: “Instead of loosening the edge of tension by humanizing him, the mantra of his name, with every circle he spun, seemed to wind the threat of violence tighter.”<sup>150</sup> Elvis’s engagement with his environment is one-dimensional for it merely reflects the threat violence poses to his self-integrity. Elvis’s failure to display empathy is recapitulated in Elvis’s move to ignore the incriminating gaze of the young girl, Kemi, one of the victims of the Colonel’s organ transplant scheme. The novel points up, through Kemi’s precarious future, Efua’s own descent into prostitution. Indeed, watching him with “sad eyes,” Kemi recalls Efua who “stared straight at [Elvis], her teeth biting her lower lip.”<sup>151</sup> In another instance, Elvis thinks he sees a woman who resembles Efua in a crowd of followers of the Guru Maharaji. Although the text clearly indicates that Efua falls into prostitution, Elvis imaginatively relocates Efua as a follower of “savior” Guru Maharaji insisting that he saw her amongst them. On one hand, Elvis describes Guru Maharaji as a “fake” and “charlatan” who threatens Efua’s well-being and as someone from whom she should be saved.<sup>152</sup> Elvis tells Redemption of his intent to save the Efua look-alike he encounters: “If that was her, I should go back and save her. But it’s

---

<sup>148</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 225.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p. 245.

probably not her.”<sup>153</sup> When Elvis draws attention to the threat Guru Maharaji poses, he conflates self and other. That is, Elvis replaces Efua’s suffering with his own fear of another looming guru—the King. Elvis’s concern for others, therefore, simply serves to emphasize his self-interest and the fraught nature of his own precarious bid for survival.

The “cumulative effect” of violence in *Graceland* triggers a sudden compression of story, which is visible in the amount of space devoted to Book II in the text. Book II reflects a larger process of narrative reversal that seeks to unhinge Elvis’s struggle as an individual from an ethically compromising narrative of violent struggle. This process of reversal gives shape to Elvis’s own sporadic efforts to rationalize the inexplicable nature of his capacity for violence and resultant guilt. *Graceland*’s precipitous denouement—its speedy navigation of various weighty situations that tend towards a final moment of symbolic resurrection for its protagonist—evokes the vaguely apocalyptic yet transformative resonances of classical Greek tragedy. Susan Andrade calls attention to *Graceland*’s mixing of the picaresque and traditional *Bildungsroman*’s conventions. She observes that much of *Graceland* follows an episodic structure of loosely connected events: “life is a series of adventures with no strong narrative arc.”<sup>154</sup> *Graceland*, however, I suggest, is purposeful in its arrangement of narrative events. Specifically, the cyclical temporality of tragedy and its propensity towards repetition allows us to conceive of the two seemingly disconnected sections of *Graceland* (Book I and Book II) as causally linked and continuous halves. Specifically, the doubling of Sunday’s struggle for recognition (his bid for political power in Book I and his attempts to save Maroko from destruction in Book II) reveals the structural logic of the novel as a coherent whole. This doubling emphasizes the precarious state of male honor. Book II, in foregrounding this structural repetition gives prominence to the following points of narrative reversal: Sunday’s attempt to rebuild Maroko and

---

<sup>153</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 246.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* p. 237.

the physical abuse that Elvis suffers at the hands of the paternalistic state.<sup>155</sup>

The first point of narrative reversal is a response to Sunday's steady downfall. In *Graceland*, Sunday's failures are signaled through the metaphor of death. In line with the representation of his symbolic death, the narrative trajectory of Book I deals with Sunday's failure to realize his career as a politician. This failure signifies Sunday's progressive decline into a state that hardly resembles Elvis's image of his father as a man committed to upholding his authoritarian and disciplinary command. Indeed, Book I establishes a clear moral hierarchy in its unraveling of Elvis's past. Here, Elvis consistently appears as the victim of a merciless father who is unwilling to hold Joseph accountable for Efuwa's rape and acknowledge his role in the murder of Godfrey. The dismantling of this hierarchy, represented by Sunday's symbolic death (he is divested of his authority through failure) creates tension in the novel because it essentially collapses Elvis's moral framework, the oppositional framework according to which Elvis is able to make sense of his position with respect to the world.

Sunday's physical death in Book II reiterates the impossibility and the superficiality of his attempts to restore lost patriarchal authority. Rather than hope that fanciful "pipe dreams" materialize, Sunday initially resigns himself to the inevitable demolition of Maroko.<sup>156</sup> In line with the novel's naturalism, there is little else that Sunday can do but stay in the slum and wait for the end. However, Sunday is also connected to the past's dreams of communal regeneration in his attempts to save the slum. Sunday's attempts to resist the demolition of Maroko speak to the resurgence of a persistent yet fragile idealistic strain that vividly mirrors Sunday's past political efforts to rally the

---

<sup>155</sup> Oliver Taplin notes, "the tendency to a central catastrophic reversal (*peripeteia* in Aristotle's terminology) encourages arrangement by doublets on either side of the fulcrum" (122). Often revolving around questions of individual status or fate, this textual reversal may take the form of a downward movement from comedy to tragedy or work in the opposite direction. Taplin also highlights the idea that "it is only with the second element of a pair of scenes that they become a pair" (122). Therefore, when the second element of the pair appears, a mirror reflection is created and the meaning of the doublet may be explored in ways that often necessitate a reevaluation of the connotations of the first element in the pair.

<sup>156</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 248.

people's support. Sunday's door-to-door campaign is contrasted with the bribes that Chief Okonkwo offers his supporters during the Afikpo elections. In calling for a revolution, Sunday takes on the role, temporarily, of the prophesying King, voicing the grievances of the people whom, he asserts, "have been treated badly by de authorities all their lives."<sup>157</sup> Much to Elvis's horror, Sunday is cast as a communal hero who superficially proclaims the utopian power of resistance in the manner of Malcolm X. Furthermore, it is the King who gives shape to Sunday's revolutionary ideas to save Maroko. The superficiality of the King's grandiose gestures throws Sunday's own naiveté and foolhardiness into relief. The King's plan is one of cosmic proportions and hinges on the people's willingness to sacrifice themselves. As Elvis notes, the spatial outline of the King's plan forms "an uneven cross—a cross that would be held down at each end by human sacrifice."<sup>158</sup> The irony of such sacrifice is made visible at the opening of the scene through the magical antics of Jagua Rigogo, another spiritual healer who "sponged off people's good graces and fear of damnation."<sup>159</sup> Here, the text seems to suggest, success (or simply the fantasy of success) depends on empty gestures of largess and the affectations of charismatic personalities. Sunday's personal failure as a father and politician highlights the grave consequences of repeated failure—the tragic downfall of an entire community.

The text suggests, through Sunday's efforts to reinvent himself as the people's charismatic leader, that the restoration of his honor depends on whether he can save Maroko. The ghostly reappearance of Sunday's wife, Beatrice, who warns him of the life-threatening danger that lies ahead, foreshadows his downfall. Nevertheless, Sunday chooses to pursue his ambition in a single-minded fashion by interrogating the authority of the intervening policeman. Unlike Sunday's failure

---

<sup>157</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 254.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p. 257.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* p. 253.



at the polls, however, his refusal to step down and his desire to “fight for [his] honor” has a positive albeit hollow outcome.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, he does not succeed in saving Maroko. Nevertheless, balance is restored symbolically through the conventions of magical realism and the text’s narrative of patriarchal failure is temporarily upended. In the final moments of Maroko’s destruction, Beatrice’s warnings, and the representation of Sunday’s wronged forefathers through the “spirit leopard,” conjure up the past as a space of spiritual fortitude and resistance. It is only in facing death “like a man” that Sunday inexplicably but comically assumes the totemic form of a “spirit leopard,” reclaiming his honor after death when “his paw deliver[s] a fatal blow to the back of the policeman’s head.”<sup>161</sup> It is here, in the inversion of natural laws, that the text achieves the restoration of a “normal” order in which an outmoded vision of male honor superficially thrives. While Sunday’s first moment of defeat seemed irremediable and wholly tragic, the movement of defeat onto a communal plane imbues Sunday’s loss with a degree of respectability that realizes the terms of success sketched out in the first scene: “as long as de fight was with honor, both warriors can rest peacefully.”<sup>162</sup> In this way, the text undermines the tragic tone that characterizes Sunday’s story in order to privilege a more redemptive narrative bent. While most of the events in *Graceland* appear largely superfluous or disparately organized, the narrative, as a whole, turns inexorably around the central recurring unit of Sunday’s patriarchal demise.

---

<sup>160</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 287.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. p. 287.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p. 219.

### 2.4.3. Torture and the State

In the novel, the apocalyptic destruction of Maroko and the tragicomic scene of Sunday's death is juxtaposed with Elvis's capture by the Colonel's soldiers and scenes of torture that lack a coherent rationale. On the level of plot, the attentive reader might attempt to link the scenes of torture with Elvis's recent criminal undertakings. For instance, it would seem that the torture might be understood in terms of Redemption and Elvis's efforts to help the Colonel carry out his organ transplant scheme. On their way to deliver the organs to the Colonel, a crowd that has discovered their plan ambushes them. They flee the crowd in a panic, ostensibly leaving the goods they are trafficking behind. However, the Colonel, despite the alleged value of the lost organs, does not refer to this event when he tortures Elvis. Rather, the novel briefly suggests that the Colonel imprisons Elvis in order to find out the identity of the King of Beggars. The causal links remain weak. The text does not account for the Colonel's need to interrogate Elvis about the King given that it establishes him as an all-knowing force: "De Colonel knows everything. Everything."<sup>163</sup> If the Colonel was actually responsible for the death of the King's family and the scar on the King's face (an identifying mark all its own), the Colonel's single-minded fixation with Elvis lacks an explanatory basis and is, in this respect, entirely superfluous. He should be able to pick the King out of a crowd. Elvis, moreover, upon his release, does not seek to warn the King. The torture is never referred to again. While anomalous in terms of plot, *Graceland's* graphic portrayal of state violence, which threatens Elvis with bodily extinction, echoes the cataclysmic nature of Book II's depiction of Maroko's demolition. Elvis's torture is equally related to the narrative process of reversal set in motion by the text's symbolic resurrection of the fallen Sunday in spirit-leopard form because it is part of a larger attempt to reconcile the private conflicts of the individual with the unyielding circumstances of

---

<sup>163</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 162.

reality. In *Graceland*, Sunday's unsuccessful attempt to save Maroko weakens the terms of a patriarchal masculinity. Indeed, Sunday's patriarchal masculinity can only exist, like the spirit leopard, in the imagining of a traditional world. Elvis's torture must be considered within the larger narrative of patriarchal failure, which (in light of its failed reversal) emphasizes Elvis's increasing inability to locate himself within an ethical framework that begins and ends with an inflexible and dogmatic code of masculinity whose sole progenitor is Sunday. Torture, therefore, works to reaffirm Elvis's integrity by temporarily resurrecting the moral absolutism of this code in hyperbolic form. In doing so, the text conflates Sunday with the villainous state. In *Graceland*, the state not only appears as an uncontrollable source of inexplicable rage but also as a force that demands regimented conformity to state authority through bodily repression. These attributes emphasize the systematic threat that the state poses to Elvis's body. By pointing up the non-existent rationale for the state's actions and its desire to exert control over Elvis's body as material object, the text equates Sunday's rational regime of bodily control with the irrational actions of the state.

The state's torture of Elvis reenacts a perverse pain-pleasure dichotomy characteristic of naturalism's sadomasochistic tendencies.<sup>164</sup> This dichotomy elucidates Elvis's fantasy of a fluid set of power relations in which it is possible to reverse positions of submission with those of domination and, in doing so, reassume self-control. This fantasy of power—a sense of pleasure and self-control that emerges from within a framework of domination—is briefly alluded to when Sunday, eager to initiate Elvis into the rituals of being a man, shaves Elvis's head:

Sunday pulled up a chair and held Elvis tightly between his knees to keep him from making any sudden moves. When the razor made contact, it buttered through the

---

<sup>164</sup> See Gammel, Irene. Gammel writes: "In naturalist fiction, it is the principle of power itself that is sexualized, which accounts for naturalism's emphasis on sado-masochistic scenes in the nineteenth century and its emphasis on rape and rapist sexualities in the twentieth century" (12).

cornrowed hair with a sandpaper rasp. The pull of it was like the rough lick of a cat's tongue, and Elvis felt himself relaxing into his father's body.<sup>165</sup>

Restricted to a fixed position, Elvis is seemingly unable to exercise control over his own body. Yet, a palpable sense of resistance gives way to feelings of pleasurable submission: the “sandpaper rasp” and “rough lick of a cat's tongue” are at odds with the “battered” movement of the razor and Elvis's bodily “relaxation” as pain finally gives way to a feeling of willing submission. This non-violent interaction departs from the preceding scene in which Sunday finds Elvis sitting on the veranda with his female relatives. This spatial transgression, a threat to Sunday's code of male conduct, results in severe bodily punishment: “[H]is father grabbed him with one hand, steadying him, while with the other he beat him around the head, face, buttocks everywhere.”<sup>166</sup> The juxtaposition of these scenes alludes, therefore, to the potential reconciliation of antagonistic forces. When Sunday shaves Elvis's head, he is able to regain, albeit within a restricted framework, a sense of control over his own body.

In *Graceland's* depiction of torture, however, the excess of punitive measures used by the state illuminates the complete triumph of state power and the imminent loss of bodily control. Here, the experience of bodily pain simply reinforces an inflexible and hierarchical relation of power. Elaine Scarry observes that torture's “self-conscious display of agency” through the infliction of absolute pain creates a “fiction of absolute power” for “there is in torture not even a fragment of a benign explanation.”<sup>167</sup> Unlike the moment in which Sunday shaves Elvis's head, the sensations of pleasure that appear during Elvis's torture by the state are immediately given over to a physically undeniable and irreversible pain. For instance, a “mass of sweet pleasant aches” is “replaced by

---

<sup>165</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 63.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>167</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. P. 34.

painful spasms” and “searing-hot pain.”<sup>168</sup> The threat of bodily annihilation looms large as the state’s desire to “beat de confusion out of [Elvis]” echoes the perpetual threat of inciting Sunday’s rage: “You think I can’t beat you now?”<sup>169</sup> Instead of a negotiable or reciprocal relationship between pain and pleasure, the text puts on display the unidirectional correlation of pain and powerlessness through its representation of torture.

The fixed image of Elvis’s powerlessness extends into the more volatile and unstable domain of hyperrealism, which attempts to create authenticity through an intense specular focus on the body. In the spectacle of torture, Elvis is transformed into a sacrificial body that the reader and the state desire and objectify. Elvis’s body becomes an image of repulsion and attraction that implicates the reader’s gaze.<sup>170</sup> Foucault points to the centrality of bodily pain in producing a ritualistic form of public spectacle. As Foucault suggests, the excess of state violence and the repetition of punishment in torture produces a sudden reversal, transforming the tortured criminal who incites disgust into the object of pity and admiration. Although *Graceland* does not include acts of public punishment, its representation of torture cultivates a voyeuristic aesthetic akin to that associated with public spectatorship. For instance, while the state’s punishment of Elvis is contained within the space of the prison, the novel highlights the state’s fascination and obsession with the visual recording of tortured bodies through photography. Redemption notes that the Colonel takes photos of those whom he tortures. The photographic reproduction of torture in *Graceland*, with its specular focus on the physical details of a materially degraded body confirms that the affirmation of state power is bound up in a fetishistic desire to visualize and return repeatedly to the scene of violence. The

---

<sup>168</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 288 and p. 289.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 120 and p. 130.

<sup>170</sup> See Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

sexualized nature of the state's violence also generates this fetishistic quality: Elvis's body becomes, as in the scene of his rape by Uncle Joseph, a spectacle for visual consumption. For example, the state mocks Elvis's inability to adhere to the dictates of a regimented masculinity by making his physical body a visible source of shame: "It was not long before Elvis shuddered and shot semen all over his torturer's hand...Tears of shame streamed down Elvis's face."<sup>171</sup> The text, however, betrays its own incongruous and inauthentic construction of Elvis's subjectivity given that the state's construction of Elvis as "homo" recalls, once again, the previously pleasurable nature of Elvis's willing reenactment of blue movie scenes. Torture nevertheless works to divert attention from Elvis's voyeuristic gaze to the state's unrestrained desires, resituating his body as grotesque spectacle.

The hyperbolic nature of Elvis's torture also works to approximate cathartic effects tantamount to a removal of the guilt associated with Elvis's participation in a string of violent events.<sup>172</sup> Specifically, Elvis's torture by the state attempts to extend the symbolic imagery of martyrdom linking Elvis with the hapless victim, Innocent. Elvis, like Innocent, is made to participate in crimes for which he must atone. Significantly, however, while Innocent's atonement revolves around the verbal retelling of a story that renders, in its prosaic expression, his complicity *explicit*: "He seemed to be deliberating within himself whether to tell Elvis something. After a while he sighed. 'I used to be a soldier in de Biafran war.' Elvis was a little surprised by that. It just seemed to come out of nowhere."<sup>173</sup> Elvis's punishment, however, is one that can only approximate psychological trauma by performing, outwardly, the bodily suffering of the penitent martyr: "Elvis hung from the metal bars on the window, feet dangling six inches from the floor, suspended by

---

<sup>171</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graveland*. p. 295.

<sup>172</sup> See Walter, Watson. *The Last Second Book of Aristotle's Poetics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012. Aristotle refers to *katharsis* in terms of religious purification, which may involve the "purification of the soul from wrongdoing and guilt" (142).

<sup>173</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graveland*. p. 209.

handcuffs.”<sup>174</sup> Such bodily suffering and pain is not accompanied by the verbal expression of remorse. Therefore, the existential absurdity of the torture scene lies in the Colonel’s “familiar” voice, which pointedly demands a confession when Elvis cannot proffer a public confession. Elvis’s bodily experience of torture deflects attention away from an inward state of reflection to an external state of unmitigated physical violence that minimizes the need for ethical accountability.

Elvis does not reflect on his experience of torture. The novel, therefore, opts for a somewhat tidy resolution by signaling Elvis’s imminent departure for America. The troubling nature of Elvis’s participation in organ trafficking on behalf of the state—a matter that seems to weigh periodically on Elvis—is not alluded to again in terms of his own morally ambiguous nature. The novel, rather, diffuses the hero’s crisis through compensatory gestures. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma, which is not acknowledged at the moment of its occurrence, often resurfaces belatedly in the form of emotional crisis at a later point in time.<sup>175</sup> In *Graceland*, however, the traumatic effects associated with torture, or the voicing of trauma, do not structure the novel’s remaining sections. Although the representation of trauma does not lend itself to linear temporalities, *Graceland* chooses to contain the emotional and ethical consequences of its hyperbolic violence in a forward-moving plot trajectory.

In *Graceland*, Elvis’s departure for America signals the culmination of the novel’s attempts to present Elvis in a redemptive light. In its final scene, the novel holds up the need to preserve Elvis’s integrity. Here, change through his spatial egress compensates for Elvis’s “immeasurable sorrow,” while also providing relief from the threat of being implicated in production of this very sorrow.<sup>176</sup> The text’s effort to lessen the weight of Elvis’s torture and violence does not only take the form of

---

<sup>174</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 288.

<sup>175</sup> Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. p. 4.

<sup>176</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 320.

Elvis's departure from Nigeria. This effort is also evinced in Elvis's melodramatic yet perfunctory revelation that he placed his own needs above those of others—in this case, Efua: “But Redemption had been right. Elvis was selfish, or self-centered, or self-obsessed. Efua had been as much his victim as she was Uncle Joseph's, even if he hadn't raped her. Elvis had never known her, at least no more than he wanted to. Perhaps that is what Redemption meant.”<sup>177</sup> The proliferation of conditionals—“or,” “if” and “perhaps”—envelops Elvis's reflection in hazy indeterminacy. Indeed, the apparent gravity of Elvis's self-accounting is rendered short-lived and insubstantial through his extended reflection on the universal pain that defines human existence. Any and all sustained reflection about Efua is replaced by Elvis's renewed obsession with the violent loss of the male self. Specifically, the novel's explicit reference to Elvis's identification with James Baldwin's representation of a “dying black man slowly being engulfed by flame” connects Elvis's private tragedy to the inevitable suffering of mankind (not without, I might add, calling up the novel's nostalgic tribute to Pan-African solidarity).<sup>178</sup> This image recalls the ethical impasse signaled by Jeremiah's burning body and his unjust suffering. In doing so, it asks whether redemption can be attained in the present. Elvis's imagination of the black man's torture reveals the centrality of torture as a tragic form of catalysis. The suffering black man “use[s] the chains that [bind] him as leverage to pull himself up and out of the torture.”<sup>179</sup> In other words, the man's “chains” are, paradoxically, less a force of bodily restraint and, instead, the means by which “leverage”—the use of force to produce an upward motion or achieve a desirable outcome—is gained. This image animates the links between violence and global mobility in the novel. Elvis's identification with the dying black man also reiterates his belief that his integrity has been compromised: “He flinched at the part where the

---

<sup>177</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 319.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p. 319.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* p. 319.



unnamed white man in the story cut off the lynched black man's genitalia. He closed the book and imagined what kind of scar that would leave."<sup>180</sup> In this meditation, the emphasis on the sexual degradation of the black man's body is figured as the potential degradation of Elvis's. The black man's scar is figuratively "inscrib[ed]" on Elvis's body.<sup>181</sup> The scar, as a visible marker of Elvis's pain and suffering, speaks for Elvis's private suffering *and* the suffering of the entire world: "[H]e was that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face. He and everyone like him, until the earth was aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire."<sup>182</sup> Curiously, this mode of emotional transference allows Elvis to simultaneously preserve and collapse his own private conflict into a suffering that knows no bounds, since admittedly, "[n]othing is ever resolved. . . . It just changes."<sup>183</sup> Therefore, while the burden of suffering can never be alleviated, it can be absorbed through a perspectival shift that figures trauma as an event that is *collectively* shared and experienced. Indeed, this shift, ironically, perpetuates the King's own desire to link his own suffering with the people's in a retributive yet seemingly selfless gesture: Elvis looks with naïve wonderment at how "the King, with all his imperfections, had become the icon for freedom and spiritual truth."<sup>184</sup> Despite these imperfections, the possibility of change still exists.

---

<sup>180</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 319.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* p. 320.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* p. 320.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* p. 320.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* p. 321.

## 2.5 The People's Struggle and The Naturalist *Bildungsroman*

*Graceland* cultivates an image of the individual striving for recognition in a new global dispensation. While addressing the social alienation of the individual in relationship to questions of moral integrity is arguably conventional, *Graceland's* reproduction of a historically situated vision of the people's struggle produces an excess of naturalist violence that lends credence to what Akin Adesokan describes as the increasing identification of the globally situated postcolonial African novel with a highly visible and accessible image of African sociopolitical crisis. That is, in *Graceland*, the people's entanglement in a recognizable current of slum violence is in step with the humanitarian concerns of a global readership drawn to what Adesokan refers to as an Africa marked by perennial crisis.<sup>185</sup> The people's recognition, therefore, is framed in terms of a literary aesthetic that aligns the circumstances the individual seeks to escape with a continual and essential violence. *Graceland's* depiction of the violent effects of sociopolitical crisis compromises the integrity of its protagonist when it evokes his implicit participation in that violence. The novel attempts to diffuse the effects of its naturalist representation of violence on the seemingly naïve Elvis by reformulating it as the state's emasculating violence, which suspends, through its threat of bodily annihilation, the need to hold Elvis morally accountable. In addition, the generic conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, which often forecast resolution and social maturation, allow the text to naturalize the people's violence (and, crucially, Elvis's conspicuous pattern of violent self-assertion) within a redemptive and self-legitimizing discourse of hetero-normative male progress. *Graceland* substitutes the sensational violence of a hyper-masculine state for the habitual violence of a powerless people. This is a powerlessness that can only be defused superficially through the reassertion of a stable and

---

<sup>185</sup> See Adesokan, Akin. "New African Writing and the Question of Audience". p. 3

autonomous male identity, which is granted through the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and upward mobility narrative: emotional growth over time and the individual's acknowledgment of the possibility of reconciling his differences with those of society at large is paired with the good fortune of attaining global mobility.<sup>186</sup>

In *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah links the corruption of the state to the legacy of colonialism and, in doing so, frames the state as a product of sociohistorical forces. The Man's old friend, Koomson, the novel implies, is no different from white colonial representatives seeking to opportunistically capitalize on the nation's resources without making contributions to its economic growth. The state, in *Graceland*, however, is largely divested of its relationship to extrinsic forces and while given human proportions (the Colonel), is not related to the materialistic culture of the nation. The state in *Graceland* is simply a reflection of the power that resides within the global or, more specifically, the global economic mobility that is seemingly beyond Elvis's reach. The state's power seems infinitely reproducible for it appears within a clearly demarcated and navigable global economic network. For instance, in what appears as the global trade of organs, the Colonel stands suspended above the volatility and complexity of global currents of power. The "whites who create de demand" counterbalance the Colonel and Saudis who provide the supply.<sup>187</sup> Here, the global arena is presented in binary terms as an uncontested space occupied by a set of uniform forces. The state's position as a global pawn relegated to providing material goods for the West echoes Elvis's desire to occupy a more autonomous role within a global economic terrain. While Redemption observes that the site of demand lies in the West, Elvis is shown to assume the role of the man of leisure who

---

<sup>186</sup> Bruce Robbins notes in *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* that "[u]pward mobility stories differ from the *bildungsroman* in that, as the term implies, they posit an initial social status for the protagonist that is lower than the final one, whereas the *bildungsroman* may well involve a lateral move, neither rising nor falling in the social hierarchy. Otherwise, the two categories will often overlap" (255, n.11).

<sup>187</sup> Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. p. 242.

creates rather than responds to demand. Elvis's purchase of an imported black shirt-and-pants combo and shoes from Italy, after haggling, allows Elvis to enact the autonomous role of a paying customer with discerning foreign tastes. Nevertheless, the presence of such accouterments of global wealth at the nightclub where he caters to foreign patrons like Rohini does not obscure Elvis's place as a cog in the global machine of material exchange. In these juxtaposed scenes, Elvis's actions reveal his desire to enter the global arena as a force that is not beholden, like the state, to other forces.

*The Beautiful Ones* does not allow the Man, despite the impulses that seem to overwhelm him in the present, to exceed the horizon of his immediate reality. The Man's efforts to help Koomson escape discovery by the new state authorities coincide with his own thoughts about the possibility of severing himself completely from his lived reality. Walking towards the fishing harbor and the sea, the Man and Koomson seem to chart a journey back in time to a simpler life. This life is defined, for instance, by Koomson's work on the docks. Unburdened by the demands of the present, the Man "took in deep breaths of the air that now fascinated him with its freedom from decay."<sup>188</sup> Although the Man's surroundings seem to suggest the possibility of freedom, the novel suggests, through the "smell of shit which had never really left him" that the Man is still implicated in that reality which he seeks to flee.<sup>189</sup> Like Koomson who sits shrouded in darkness, attempting to thwart the advances of the outside world, the Man sinks deep into the water, "enjoy[ing] the almost exploding inward feeling that he was perhaps no longer alive."<sup>190</sup> Similarly, the Man's vision of Maanan, who with "urgency in her diseased soul," proclaims, "[t]hey have mixed it all together!" signals, once again, the

---

<sup>188</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 169.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. p. 174

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. p. 176.

futility of trying to maintain the pristine quality of a seemingly uncompromised past.<sup>191</sup> While *Graceland* allows this realization, on Elvis's part, to propel his exit from the nation, the *Beautiful Ones* denies the idealism associated with the idea of escape. For example, the words that the Man reads on the side of a green bus (The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born), flow together in a circular fashion and, thus, seem to hold out the promise of spiritual regeneration. However, this scene immediately gives way to the sprightly song of the chichidodo bird content to exist in decayed and stagnant surroundings. Similarly, while "a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful" graces the exterior of the vibrantly colored bus, these markers of transformation are undercut by the bus driver's extension of a bribe to the policemen at the barrier and his ready acknowledgment of the observant Man.<sup>192</sup> Unlike the bus driver of the opening scene who balks at the Man's observation of his indiscretions, the bus driver of the green bus who smiles and waves to the Man betrays his own lack of shame. If resolution in *The Beautiful Ones* comes in the form of a cyclical return to the beginning of the Man's journey with the Man returning home in defeat, resolution in *Graceland* takes the form of global escape that enables a complete and conscience-free departure from the nation.

The new African novel's representation of violent struggle does not reflect the impetus of an inherited nationalist narrative. Rather than express the need to consolidate national consciousness, *Graceland* illustrates that the memory of a failed commitment to the nation impinges on the construction of a globally mobile self. The novel displays its self-consciousness about the compromised integrity of the individual through a process of narrative reversals. These reversals respond to the novel's inability to separate the violence of a national reality from the tumultuous nature of an internal struggle. The resolution to this struggle appears as an inexorable turn away from the conflicts of the nation.

---

<sup>191</sup> Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones*. p. 177.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* p. 183.

## Chapter 3: Sidestepping the Political “Graveyard of Creativity”: Polyphony, Metadiegetic Narratives and Re-Envisioning the Nation-State in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987/88), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *The Memory of Love* (2010)

Part of the body of fiction produced by a new generation of African writers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love* (2010) appear, through their polyphonic and multi-voiced narratives, to celebrate a vision of sociocultural inclusivity akin to Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*. They echo its preoccupation with realizing a heterogeneous national story by extending the role of national storyteller to voices that are not ordinarily represented within the nation. Specifically, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Memory of Love* foreground dialogues between national insiders and outsiders: citizens and non-citizens. As in *Anthills*, the novels’ vision of what the state could look like is bound up in their formal delineation of which characters may lay claim to an authorial identity. In Adichie and Forna’s novels, the question of whether it is possible to restore the democratic functions of the African state depends on who may write the story of the nation. The novels’ acknowledgment of the legitimacy of outsiders’ authorial positions within the nation signals a renewed faith in the possibility of instituting a democratic realm of participation and, therefore, the potential rehabilitation of the state along more inclusive lines. In this chapter I argue, however, that the tensions surrounding the idea of national belonging, which are manifested on the level of the novels’ form, a reflection of what Frederic

Jameson has termed the “political unconscious,” trigger a systematic foreclosure of any possibility of openness and, consequently, the likelihood of reforming the state to reflect democratic ideals of citizenship.<sup>1</sup> The nationalistic tendencies that emerge within *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Memory of Love* undermine their structural attempts to instill, through the presence of dissonant voices, a spirit of inclusivity.

### 3.1 Creating an Open Path to Reform in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987/88)

Critics of the Anglophone African novel often draw attention to Chinua Achebe’s efforts to bring an underrepresented female voice to bear on the shortcomings of a male-centric approach to political governance in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).<sup>2</sup> Contemplating the nature of storytelling in *Anthills*, Nana Wilson-Tagoe observes that by “decentering the old framework in which a dominant male elite assumed the right to imagine the nation and act in its name, *Anthills* appears to create a context for productive tensions between heterogeneous narratives of the nation’s story.”<sup>3</sup> Set in the imaginary African country of Kangan, the novel positions several well-educated individuals as undisputed authors of this story. *Anthills* depicts their struggle to come to terms with the politically debilitating transformation of their childhood friend, Sam, into a despotic head-of-state. With his rise to power, Sam, a Sandhurst-trained military officer, appoints his friends to prominent administrative positions. The complacency of his Commissioner for Information, Christopher Oriko, distances Chris from the struggle at hand. Ikem Osodi’s incendiary beliefs prevent him, as poet-intellectual, from grounding his plans in a pragmatic course of action. At odds over the proper

---

<sup>1</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Columbia Guide to West African Literature in English Since 1945*, Oyekan Owomoyela notes that Achebe seeks to correct the portrayal of women as “mere appendages to their men” in *Anthills of the Savannah* (35). See also Owusu; Izevbaye; Gordimer; Nwankwo; Innes; Stratton; Opara; and Kolawole.

<sup>3</sup> See Nana Wilson-Tagoe in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. p. 182. This view of storytelling corresponds to Bakhtin’s philosophical theorizing of the polyphonic novel (see Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*). Polyphony speaks to the presence of autonomous yet interconnected social voices and beings.

route to social reform, Chris and Ikem drift apart. Their mutual friend Beatrice Okoh, a secretary in the Ministry for Finance, attempts to unsettle their myopic beliefs about social change. After Ikem's abduction by state authorities, Beatrice takes the lead in coordinating efforts to move Chris to a remote location in rural Abazon. In the wake of Ikem and Chris's untimely deaths, Achebe holds up Beatrice as a representative of marginalized voices who can facilitate communication between disparate groups in the nation. In doing so, *Anthills of the Savannah* demonstrates that the possibility of cultivating a viable statehood rests on extending the role of the nation's storyteller to peripheral voices.

*Anthills of the Savannah* relates the feasibility of political reform to the creation of an inclusive social dialogue. The novel's poet-visionary, Ikem, admits that he has overlooked the role of women in advancing reform. In a move that undermines what Clement Okafor describes as the novel's repudiation of an "egocentric masculinity" that originates in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ikem acknowledges that women have been excluded from a dialogue about change: "I can't tell you what the new role for Woman will be. I don't know. I should never have presumed to know. *You* have to tell us. We never asked you before."<sup>4</sup> Ikem argues that each group within the nation must share its particular experience of reality given that "[t]here is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed."<sup>5</sup> His belief that every social group should express their potentially discordant views echoes Bakhtin's theorization of the non-hierarchized interaction of contradictory voices. According to Ikem, the interaction of these voices fuels innovation—the basis for reform—because it challenges the seeming irrefutability of all-encompassing belief systems: as Ikem observes, "Orthodoxy whether of the right or of the left is the graveyard of creativity."<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to envision the redemption of the nation-state, *Anthills* suggests that an insular view of reality cannot stand in for the experiences

---

<sup>4</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 90; Okafor, Clement A. "Masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*." p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 91.



of an entire nation.

Achebe expresses the idea of pluralistic social discourse through the polyphonic form of his novel. Presented in chapter headings as witnesses to the events around them, Chris and Ikem provide testimonies that constitute a privileged narrative about the nation. Beatrice, who acts as a sounding board for Chris and Ikem's political beliefs and grievances, views the present from a vantage point that lies outside a circle defined by a tragic male friendship. *Anthills* highlights Beatrice's awareness of her circumscribed but privileged position as an educated woman. Despite her uneasiness with a personal history defined by inflexible patriarchal custom, Beatrice draws on the productive aspects of a traditional world. *Anthills* views the spiritual and creative resources of the traditional world as the basis for creating social reform grounded in dialogic exchange.<sup>7</sup> As Margaret Nutsukpo observes, much of *Anthills'* renewed hope in change derives from Beatrice's use of language as a means of self-assertion given that "for Africa to come into its own, each individual should be recognized, and allowed to play a part in the developmental process" (146). In *Anthills*, the resources of a traditional world, which are attributed to non-orthodox, informal and hybrid forms of written and spoken ritual, enable the individual to act diligently on his or her surroundings and mediate unobtrusively between the nation's socially variegated inhabitants. In an attempt to envision the redemption of the nation-state, *Anthills* suggests that an insular view of reality cannot stand in for the experiences of an entire nation. While Chris is largely alienated from the knowledge of the traditional world, Beatrice follows Ikem's creative lead while grounding change in a more pragmatic sphere.

*Anthills of the Savannah* attributes the failure of the educated elite to its overly conservative

---

<sup>7</sup> Ali Erritouni observes that "*Anthills* is a dialogic novel in the sense that it dramatizes not only characters from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, but also urban workers, peasants, taxi-drivers, and housemaids. These characters contest the elitism of the General and his entourage, as well as that of dissident intellectuals like Ikem" (65).

nature. In *Anthills*, Chris explains his continued membership in Sam's cabinet in terms of the need to understand the reasons behind his colleagues' negligent actions. However, the novel highlights Chris's own failure to challenge Sam's power and, therefore, his inextricability from the group whose actions he has set out to observe. Sam expresses his refusal to meet with a tribal delegation from the rural region of Abazon. The group, who votes against Sam's becoming President for life, is met with his refusal to help them relieve the effects of extreme drought. During a meeting convened in order to address the Abazonians' discontent, Sam questions Chris's advice that he meet leaders of the Abazon delegation. Chris's unwillingness to go head-to-head with Sam aligns him with the fearful Honourable Commissioner for Education who, in anticipation of Sam's foul mood, "had begun to disappear into his hole, as some animals and insects do, backwards."<sup>8</sup> The similarities between the Honourable Commissioner for Education and Chris demonstrate that the text equates Chris's neutrality with fear. For example, rather than risk inciting the repercussions that would follow a sudden retreat, the Commissioner reproduces Chris's conciliatory and diplomatic gestures: "[Chris] was quite certain that the poor fellow (never a strong one for originality) was getting ready to speak [his] very words, strictly in the same sequence."<sup>9</sup> Yet, although Chris provides a satirical account of the Commissioner's mindless mimicry, he also displays conformist behavior: "I say nothing, make no motion, not even of the head."<sup>10</sup> While Chris asserts that the silence accompanying the Commissioner's panic-induced actions reflects his position as "the most frightened of the lot," he attributes his own "quietude" to "[p]ure, unadulterated disinterest."<sup>11</sup> He, therefore, links his unwillingness to voice his opinion to objectivity instead of cowardice. Ironically, Chris's assertion that he would like to separate himself from the Attorney General's reference to Ikem as a political

---

<sup>8</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 3

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 3, and p. 4.

dissident frightens his colleagues because they mistake his meaning for an unequivocal declaration of dissent: “I liked the look of terror on my colleagues’ faces when I used the word *dissociate* and the relaxation that followed when they realized that I was not saying what they feared I was saying.”<sup>12</sup> This confusion is reflected, for instance, in the Chief Secretary’s sudden decision to speak on Chris’s behalf. However, Chris’s declaration simply reveals his desire to separate himself from inequitable judgments in the interest of preserving his objectivity. In *Anthills*, Chris’s loyalty to the state means that he makes himself the passive instrument of forces whose power he himself has helped constitute and uphold.

Although it sets forth a critique of the conservatism of Chris’s disinterested attitude, *Anthills* also accords value to his uneasiness with political radicalism. It does so when it links Ikem’s fanatical approach to social change to the conscience-free and selfish activities of neocolonial forces. Mad Medico is the nickname given to John Kent, a British man who is the only foreign friend of Ikem, Sam, and Chris. Mad Medico writes graffiti consisting of jokes on the walls of different hospital wards. The incongruity of the sober setting of the hospital and the comic graffiti, meant to lift the patients’ spirits, provokes considerable backlash from the hospital’s doctors who take offense and call for Mad Medico’s removal. While Ikem concedes that Mad Medico was careless, he does not consider the act of writing graffiti a crime in and of itself. In Ikem’s mind, Mad Medico’s act only provokes outrage because it involves the public disgrace of the country’s intellectual elites by a layman and foreigner. As he points out, his crime pales in comparison to the hospital doctors’ negligent practices as they refuse to provide care to destitute patients. Mad Medico’s actions are intended to be playful and irreverent: he believes that the greater tragedy that afflicts those in power

---

<sup>12</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 5.

is not corruption but a tendency to become “boring” and “predictable.”<sup>13</sup> This tragedy, he believes, has befallen Sam. His graffiti, as the illicit marking of a public space, represents an attempt to challenge the norms of a particular social order. Like Ikem’s crusading editorials, it is a transgressive mode of self-expression that expresses alienation from the state’s political ideology. The fact that Mad Medico’s graffiti does not provoke laughter but outright indignation reinforces the powerful hold of Sam’s political order: “No sense of humour left. None whatsoever. They are all so stiff and damned patriotic, so quick to take offence.”<sup>14</sup> Mad Medico’s critique resonates with Ikem’s description of Chris’s dutiful service to Sam and his efforts to keep up with the constant shifts of Sam’s political views. Therefore, although Mad Medico’s humor may be understood as representative of the liberties that foreigners continue to take, it also reinforces the need to depart from the established protocols of insular institutions and engage in a process of self-reflection. Mad Medico’s graffiti, as a mode of expressing disenchantment with the status quo, calls up the purpose that Ikem attributes to his own editorials. His editorials, he explains, should serve a revelatory purpose that consists of “letting [Sam] glimpse a little light now and again through chinks in his solid wall of court jesters.”<sup>15</sup> Although it is unclear whether Ikem is alluding to Chris, his observation nevertheless underscores the submissive rather than critical role of his Cabinet advisers. Nevertheless, the social protest that Mad Medico undertakes is stripped of its impact because of its desire to make itself, as a powerful force, visible at all costs. Mad Medico’s naïveté about the outcome of his actions recalls Ikem’s: “Chris said I was a romantic; that I had no solid contact with the ordinary people of Kangan.”<sup>16</sup> In this respect, Ikem’s romanticism, like Mad Medico’s naïve actions, highlights an image of a middle class intellectual who, like his foreign counterpart, is unable

---

<sup>13</sup> Achebe, *Chinua*. p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

to express his revolutionary ideas in a moderate manner that acknowledges the limitations of the actions it prescribes.

In *Anthills*, ritual serves to create a harmonious relationship between the self and an alienating world while offering up a means of proactive self-actualization. Beatrice calls attention to the idea of integrated worlds expressed as *uwa t'uwa* in her people's language. Beatrice's ritualistic invocation of *uwa t'uwa* reflects the possibility of creating a harmonious relationship between the individual and the world. Achieving the status of a mantra, the repetition of these words allows Beatrice to cultivate a measured response to a world that is unresponsive to the particularities of its inhabitants. *Uwa t'uwa* designates the familiarity and comfort that repetition generates: "[*uwa-t'uwa*] became the sound of the rain in the ear as it opened and closed, opened and closed. *Uwa t'uwa t'uwa t'uwa ; Uwa t'uwa.*"<sup>17</sup> Beatrice's anticipation of the words *uwa t'uwa*, which always mark the end of her father's lengthy family prayers, signals an unchanging but reassuringly familiar pattern of ritual. From a solitary position, Beatrice "modulat[es] the storm's song by pressing [her] palms against [her] ears and taking them off rhythmically."<sup>18</sup> Beatrice's rhythmic modulation of the sounds of the outside world, which alludes to the even tempo of the sound of *uwa t'uwa*, evokes the possibility of creating a harmonious relationship between the self and the outside world. However, the text's representation of *uwa t'uwa* also reaffirms Beatrice's potential departure from the demands and expectations of the outside world. It suggests a certain degree of improvisational agency. The sound of *uwa t'uwa*, with its "capacity for infinite replication," gestures towards the possibility of creative inventiveness that allows for movement into the future.<sup>19</sup> When Beatrice is suddenly woken up at the end of a family prayer by the words *uwa t'uwa*, she spontaneously expresses her gratitude

---

<sup>17</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

with a hymn based on the enthusiastic repetition of *uwa t'owa*. Here, *uwa t'owa* functions as a creative “building block” that allows Beatrice to “make and mould all kinds of thoughts.”<sup>20</sup> Her chant illustrates that innovation can be achieved within a uniform structure. Therefore, it signals both continuity and a departure from the accepted mode of religious worship dictated by her father.

*Anthills* suggests that, despite its stifling insularity, the traditional world must not be viewed as merely an obstacle to the work of innovation being carried out in the present. It asserts instead that the quotidian rituals of the past actually help facilitate social change. The novel highlights the value of the past through its description of the newly renovated bus that Chris rides during his trip to the North, a refuge from the political chaos of the city. The bus, which is part of a new generation of buses called *Luxurious*, reflects the newfound material comfort and emergent prosperity of modernity. However, although the *Luxurious* is factory-built and fitted out with new upholstered seats, Chris observes that it has preserved its more humble origins. For example, he pinpoints a similarity between the intricate lettering that the sign-writers use on the new buses with the lettering that was uniquely characteristic of an older generation of sign-writers: “The florid lettering had remained virtually unchanged by prosperity.”<sup>21</sup> While influenced by this older tradition, the sign-writers have also built on this decorative tradition in order to reflect their own spirit of innovation:

The sign-writers had long expanded their assignment from merely copying down the short word BUS into more elaborate messages rather in the tradition of that unknown monk working away soberly by candle-light copying out the Lord's Prayer as he must have done scores of times before and then, seized by a sudden and unprecedented impulse of adoration, proceeded to end the prayer on a new fantastic

---

<sup>20</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 185.

flourish of his own: *For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever,  
Amen!*<sup>22</sup>

Achebe aligns the innovative practices of the sign-writers with the ritualistic work of the devoted monk. In doing so, he imparts a spiritual dimension to their mundane work. Their sudden departure from the normative reproduction of the word BUS and the monk's obedient reproduction of the Lord's Prayer calls up Beatrice's creative embellishment to her father's prayer. The text contrasts the work of the sign-writers, which occurs in plain sight and amidst the quotidian transactions of an open marketplace, with the secluded and solitary activities of the monk. This particular contrast serves to highlight the sign-writers' departure from a private form of innovation. In identifying this contrast, the text alludes to Beatrice's modulation of the sounds of the storm from within the protective and bounded cocoon of her floor mat. While Beatrice's older sister would run defiantly into the pouring rain, she would listen to the storm from her reclusive indoor position. The work of innovation that the sign-writers carry out is democratic by virtue of its exposure to the outside world. Their work, which occurs under inhospitable and unfavorable circumstances, is attuned to the volatile nature of reality itself. The first welders who crafted and assembled the panels of the bus also evoke Beatrice's father and his participation in a gradual yet subversive mode of linguistic innovation that paves the way for the progress of future generations: he "hack[ed] away in the archetypal jungle and subvert[ed] the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight [Beatrice's] way."<sup>23</sup> As the narrator indicates, the welder of yesterday is now the manager of his own line of *Luxurious* buses. Therefore, *Anthills* emphasizes that the inhabitants of modern Kangan must consider change as a gradual and laborious process that has its origins in the innovative practices of the past.

---

<sup>22</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

Although ritual, as an invaluable remnant of the old world, is conceived as a primary vehicle for engendering change, the novel emphasizes that it must work around present limitations during its closing scene. Here, in the wake of Chris and Ikem's deaths, Beatrice takes the lead in organizing the naming ceremony for Ikem and Elewa's baby. Although Beatrice maintains the form of ceremony, she alters its content: "Indeed except in name only she did not intend ceremony of any kind."<sup>24</sup> The air of optimism that attends naming ceremonies assumes a birth into prosperity and the protective presence of a father. The delayed arrival of Elewa's mother presents another limitation that causes Beatrice to take charge of the event: "[Beatrice] called the little assembly to order and proceeded to improvise a ritual."<sup>25</sup> The naming ritual acknowledges the example of a Biblical tradition of naming while privileging an alternative construction of the idea of hope: "There was an Old Testament prophet who named his son *The-remnant-shall-return*. . . . We have a different metaphor, though; we have our own version of hope that springs eternal. We shall call this child AMAECHINA: *May-the-path-never-close*."<sup>26</sup> The Old Testament valorizes a vision of society that places its hopes in the figure of the worthy son who has been chosen by God to serve a higher purpose. In Beatrice's ritual, hope is not located in a particular time. Alluding to the open-endedness of *uwa-t'uwa*, hope does not reside in the future (the eventual return of the remnant) but is sustained continuously through its ritualistic manifestation by the people. The characterization of Ikem's legacy as that which inheres in his daughter—the "Path of Ikem"—demonstrates the text's desire to figure women as the spiritual guardians of the nation. The naming ritual also gives Elewa the opportunity to choose a name for her child. Elewa suggests that she is incapable of naming her child because she lacks education. However, Beatrice points up the fact that Elewa, from that suffering,

---

<sup>24</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anhills of the Savannah*. 201.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206.



has produced a concrete embodiment of the nation's hope. In doing so, she shows that the people's contributions are not circumscribed by the reality of their oppression: "All of we,' continued Beatrice, 'done see *baad* time; but na you one, Elewa, come produce something wonderful like this to show your sufferhead. Something alive and kicking."<sup>27</sup> Beatrice, in illuminating the disparity between the idea of suffering and its actuality, suggests that Elewa's daughter reflects the experience of the nation's suffering at the same time that it creates a regenerative, albeit immaterial, hope. Ikem, unlike Beatrice, singled out Elewa because of her capacity to deal stoically with her misfortune. However, *Anthills* suggests that privileging this form of self-negating acceptance obscures the reality of those who struggle to cope with the effects of their oppression and conceal their grief.<sup>28</sup> Beatrice valorizes the actuality of Elewa's suffering, indicating that her struggle complements ritual as a form of resistance that is rooted in reality. In this scene, Elewa is transformed, from an individual whose stoic endurance of suffering makes her an idealized object of veneration, into a visible reminder of oppression as the people's lived reality. The harsh reality of the nation's struggles must not be negated but acknowledged, through ritual, as the starting point from which change can materialize.

Through the participatory aspects of Beatrice's ritual, *Anthills of the Savannah* asserts that the authority to speak for the nation does not rest in the hands of any particular group. This realization, played out in the shifting perspectives of the characters themselves, reiterates the observation, made by C.L. Innes, that "the relationship between author, characters and readers should be analogous to the relationship between politicians and electorate in the ideal state, the leaders in each case accepting the necessity for genuine dialogue with and tolerance of those for whom they are

---

<sup>27</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 207.

<sup>28</sup> This is true of Agatha, Beatrice's house girl, whose evangelical Christian beliefs do not alleviate the psychological burden of her impoverished circumstances.

responsible.”<sup>29</sup> Such dialogue requires a willingness to engage in acts of self-examination. For instance, when Elewa’s elderly uncle discovers that the group led by Beatrice has taken the task of naming the child into their own hands, he bursts into laughter: “His explosion into laughter took everybody by surprise and then dragged them all into his bombshell of gaiety. Except Elewa’s mother. ‘You young people,’ said the old man. ‘What you will bring this world to is pregnant and nursing a baby at the same time.’”<sup>30</sup> The old man emphasizes the capacity of a younger generation to cope with multiple challenges. Instead of displaying the intransigence that his wife displays, the old man’s laughter reaffirms the necessity of embracing change in a fearless manner. Although the old man acknowledges his wife’s annoyance, which stems from the anger of “outraged custom,” he validates the group’s ability to innovate and devise alternatives in the face of obstacles: “I am laughing because in you young people the world has met its match. Yes! You have put the world where it should sit...My wife here was breaking her head looking for kolanuts, for alligator pepper, for honey and for bitter-leaf.”<sup>31</sup> The old man’s receptiveness to the unconventional naming ceremony reflects his realization that there is no room for individuals who claim to possess an authoritative knowledge of what is best for the nation.

In *Anthills*, Achebe looks to the polyvocal attributes of ritual as a means of mitigating the effects of man’s alienation from one another. In the face of social estrangement, the call and response format of the prayer led by Elewa’s uncle serves as a platform for the building of interpersonal ties between the speaker—as a representative of the world of ancestors—and his auditors. This pattern of distinct invocations, which is followed by the group’s collective choral affirmations, sets forth the novel’s ideal of social reciprocity. Through Beatrice’s use of ritual as an

---

<sup>29</sup> Innes, C. L. *Achebe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. p. 163.

<sup>30</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. p. 209.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 209 and p. 210.

inclusive form of leadership, *Anthills* demonstrates that political reform relies on collective innovation, an acceptance of the limitations posed by reality, and a desire to incorporate diverse perspectives. It emphasizes that social change demands a willingness to acknowledge but also look beyond conventional sources of knowledge, wisdom, and authority. Linking ritual to its genesis in the communal hardships of the past, *Anthills* also demonstrates that reform is a cumulative process that requires a pragmatic and sustained approach to ongoing challenges.

### **3.2 Who Writes the Nation's Story? Authorship and Politics in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)**

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, dialogic exchange among different social groups in the nation reaffirms the possibility of moving past a stagnant political reality. Like Achebe's *Anthills*, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* brings together characters of distinct social backgrounds: the motley cast speaks from their own unique positions, clearly defined by class, gender and racial identity. *Half of a Yellow Sun* follows its characters through a non-linear presentation of events leading up to and beyond the unsuccessful Biafran war for independence.<sup>32</sup> Each character comes to the project of Biafran independence with a set of personal or political motivations. Adichie depicts the hopes and desires of a Nigerian middle class family: the twins, Olanna and Kainene, and their well-established, entrepreneurial parents. The novel also follows the lives of the twins' educated and socially conscious lovers, Odenigbo, a university lecturer, and Richard, a British expatriate and journalist who displays an acute awareness of the sociopolitical conflicts at hand and strives to do justice to the cultural complexity of Nigeria and Africa through his writing. Readers view a substantial portion of the events from the perspective of Ugwu, a houseboy who loyally remains with Odenigbo and

---

<sup>32</sup> For an account of the Biafran war, see Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe's *Biafra Revisited* (2007); Suzanne Cronje. *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Nigerian War 1967-1970*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972; and Joseph Okpaku, ed., *Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood, An African Analysis of the Biafran Conflict*. New York: Third Press, 1972.

Olanna throughout the Biafran war until his forced conscription into the Biafran army.<sup>33</sup> Taken under the wing of Odenigbo, who emphatically asserts that “education is a priority,” Ugwu develops a passion for reading, a hobby incorporated rather seamlessly into his work as a houseboy.<sup>34</sup> The text’s polyphonic structure seems to reflect an idea of national belonging that extends across the lines of race and class. Nevertheless, *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s vision of solidarity across racial boundaries is eclipsed by its nationalistic ending, which privileges Ugwu as the real leader of the nation. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, like *Anthills of the Savannah*, strives to bring forth a vision of democratic social participation, but it fails to realize this possibility. Instead, it assumes the mantle of a revolutionary nationalism in which Ugwu comes to unproblematically represent the fundamental role of the people in rearticulating the history of a divided middle class.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* is divided into four sections, which indicate various temporal phases of the story. The second and third section of the novel, labeled “the late 60s” and “early 60s” respectively, are presented out of chronological order. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* ambiguity around authorship is produced by discrepancies between the story and discourse, which are a result of differences between how story events are presented in the discourse (text) as opposed to their actual chronological order within the story.<sup>35</sup> Text or discourse signifies the “spoken or written discourse, which undertakes [the] telling” of various happenings.<sup>36</sup> Story refers to “the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together

---

<sup>33</sup> Ugwu eventually returns to Odenigbo and Olanna after his service to the Biafran army.

<sup>34</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> See Prince, Gerald. Prince, Gerald. *Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition). Narrative is composed of two parallel levels, *story*—the narrated events reconstructed in their chronological order, and *discourse*—the actual presentation of story events in the narrative. The discourse of any given narrative, broadly speaking, encompasses the actual presentation of the narrative. It refers to *how* a narrative is presented as opposed to *what* it includes. According to Gerald Prince, discourse refers to the discursive presentation or narration of events in the text: it is “[t]he expression plane of narrative as opposed to its content plane of story” (21).

<sup>36</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). p. 3.

with the participants in these events.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout the discourse, the reader is presented with snippets of an unfinished book (*The Book*) about the Biafran war. Not provided with any information about the identity of the author of *The Book*, the reader is forced to infer the unnamed author’s identity based on the information he or she receives in the text and by retrospectively filling in the gaps that emerge in the story. The narratological device called the temporary gap forces the reader of *Half of a Yellow Sun* to construct the story on the basis of information presented in the discourse. Sternberg observes that the temporary gap produces various narrative effects like curiosity, surprise, and suspense. According to Sternberg, curiosity occurs when “knowing that we do not know, we go forward with our mind on the gapped antecedents, trying to infer (bridge, compose) them in retrospect.”<sup>38</sup> The ambiguity produced by the temporary gap in *Half of a Yellow Sun* allows us to posit two likely authors of *The Book*: Richard or Ugwu.

Ugwu is often held up, by various critics of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as the face of the nation. For example, according to John Marx, the fact that Adichie identifies Ugwu, in the closing moments of the narrative, as the author of *The Book* indicates her wish to validate the knowledge and experiences of individuals disempowered by state crisis: “When fiction discovers laypeople to replace administrative officials and expert observers, it enlarges the field of meritocratic politics.”<sup>39</sup> In *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel*, Marx affirms the inclusive ambitions of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and highlights the diversity of social actors in the novel who contribute to managing the failed state. Specifically, Marx makes a case for the way interpersonal solidarities between administrative figures and laypeople within the fictional world of the novel undermine dominant colonial narratives about race, power, and class with a view to reshaping existing ideas about governance. He asserts that the

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p.3.

<sup>38</sup> See Sternberg. “How Narrativity Makes a Difference” (117).

<sup>39</sup> Marx, John. *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel*, 1890-2011. p. 14.

novel, which “sentimentalizes the notion of meritocracy,” makes claims about what professional or administrative authority should look like and who can exercise it.<sup>40</sup> He notes that the possibility of fictional characters or “sociological actors” achieving a status akin to that of a professional “expert” reveals a kind of novelistic politics, which reaffirms the validity of an author’s beliefs (often authors from the “Third World”) about a given society instead of those routinely made in the statistics-oriented world of political science.<sup>41</sup> Marx’s equation of the status of non-credentialed expert with Ugwu’s experience and knowledge of violence (Ugwu is pressured into raping a bar girl during his stint as Biafran soldier) seems to disregard not only the ethical dimensions of the novel itself but also the way the novel as narrative shapes its readers’ understanding of the fictional world.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Marx’s desire to read Adichie’s intellectual-child soldier as representative of her own authorial intent lessens our ability, as readers, to grasp the textual nuances and inconsistencies around who may be considered an “expert” in the fictional world of *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Echoing the biographical aspects of Marx’s analysis, Brenda Cooper argues that the “pressure on African writers to prove their credentials of authenticity” cause Adichie to paint Richard as a stereotypical white racist and to set forth a more redemptive view of Ugwu (after his rape of a bar girl) as “hope for the future.”<sup>43</sup> In order to reconcile Ugwu’s actions as rapist with his role in the novel’s “cultural and national healing project,” Cooper suggests that Adichie allows Ugwu to partially “atone” for his wartime sins through his authorship of *The Book*, which demands that he

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Marx, John. p. 25. See Marx’s reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun* in which he emphasizes the novel’s overturning of political science’s understanding of the failed-state. This model of the failed state, he suggests, is steeped in a rhetoric of normalcy that is challenged by the world of the novel.

<sup>42</sup> Marx establishes a seamless link between Adichie and Ugwu to whom, Marx claims, Adichie “[assigns] [a] fictional author-function” (72). This is a deliberate act that, he believes, along with the bibliography and Author’s Note, “shapes expectations about the author whose name is on *Half of a Yellow Sun*” (72).

<sup>43</sup> Cooper, Brenda. *A New Generation of African Writers*. pp. 146, 144.

record the war atrocities around him.<sup>44</sup> Cooper grants Adichie’s biographical details explanatory force when she claims that Adichie’s choice to bestow Ugwu with the title of author is a result of the pressure on Adichie, as a migrant writer educated and largely based in the West, to prove her cultural knowledge of the continent as well as to undo a deeply entrenched colonial view of Africa: “Ugwu’s writing echoes older forms of Igbo creativity as symbolized by the ancient roped pot and traditional Igbo words and wisdom, which pepper the novel.”<sup>45</sup> Cooper, therefore, assumes that Adichie, and other middle class writers, systematically work against the cultural essentialism of the West. Yet in using an essentialist historical framework herself to explain the novel’s choice to confer an authorial role on Ugwu, Cooper reproduces the binary logic that she feels is a troubling aspect of the novel’s reliance on the dominant cultural tropes (cultural essentialism) of metaphoric language. She explains Richard’s representation as “white racist” in terms of a “history of slavery [that] is often presented as a deeply unifying phenomenon for all black people everywhere.”<sup>46</sup> This assumes, at root, the existence of a “unifying” black Igbo experience in the novel despite the fact that the novel consistently troubles attempts to posit an “either/or” reading of its portrayal of Richard and Ugwu in cultural terms.<sup>47</sup> Cooper’s explanation of Adichie’s elevation of Ugwu to the role of author does not satisfactorily address the way this swift novelistic resolution responds, unconsciously, to the demands of the text’s class-based narrative, which circumscribes the social sphere of the fictional world.

While Cooper isolates narrative strategies that create an ambiguity around authorship, she

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 148.

<sup>45</sup> See p. 133 in *A New Generation of African Writers*. Cooper’s thesis is guided largely by Eileen Julien’s theory of “ornamentalism.” Julien argues that the inclusion of words from indigenous languages and an African oral tradition “results from the pressure on African novelists to ‘authenticate’ their writing as genuinely African by dressing up their European structures of thought in the garb of African ‘oral traditions, national languages, and folklore’ (2006: 674)” (12).

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, Brenda. p. 147.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

overlooks the impact of what I term “a first reading” on the reader’s evaluation of the novel’s representation of authorship. Consequently, she does not account for the way *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s use of temporary gaps causes the reader, through a process of textual inference, to identify Richard as the *most likely* author of *The Book*. Cooper claims that the possibility of “shared authorship” between Ugwu and Richard in *Half of a Yellow Sun* results from narrative strategies that produce confusion about who is ultimately responsible for the writing of *The Book* about Biafra. The novel does not initially allow us to posit Ugwu as a viable co-author: by reducing ambiguity it actually works to resolve the contradictions that emerge in Richard’s characterization by consolidating his position as a cultural insider. This reading accounts more fully for the reader’s experience of the narratological effect of surprise when she reaches the final pages of the novel.<sup>48</sup> Cooper’s analysis is written from the perspective of someone who may be reading the book for the second time (who already knows the final identity of *The Book*’s author), my reading posits a reader who approaches the text for the *first* time. In Marx and Cooper’s analysis, Ugwu’s identity as author of *The Book* straightforwardly appears as an exemplary instance of Adichie’s commitment to the nation and its people.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *The Book*’s narration of the “untold” history of Biafra, which voices the effects of British colonialism on Nigeria and the passive, almost voyeuristic, response of the world to the suffering of Biafrans, reflects a set of concerns echoed throughout the story (diegesis). *The Book* comprises the innermost narrative layer of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and appears in fragments, interspersed throughout the entire discourse. Gérard Genette would describe this type of metadiegetic narrative as having a purely thematic function. In this case, there is “no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis: [it is simply] a relationship of contrast . . . or of

---

<sup>48</sup> Surprise may be thought of in terms of Meir Sternberg’s description of the narratological effects produced by the resolution or “filling in” of temporary gaps.



analogy.”<sup>49</sup> *The Book* is the “structure en abyme,” which is “an extreme form of [the] relationship of analogy, pushed to the limits of identity.”<sup>50</sup> For instance, we might read *The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died* as a miniature version of the novel as a whole. If we do, it becomes clear that the two narratives work toward fulfilling an analogous function. The metadiegesis, like the diegesis, asks questions like “Who should be held accountable for the failure of the Biafran state?” “What constitutes an ‘authentic’ or ‘accurate’ history of Biafra?” and “How does one bring to light the story of a people whose suffering became a fleeting image featured in the ‘gloss-filled pages of your *Life*?”<sup>51</sup> *The Book* produces a “temporary gap” in the story because its author is not immediately identified. Our ability to identify Richard as the author of *The Book*, based on the information we receive throughout the discourse, works to establish him as a member of the Biafran community. It also represents the novel’s attempts to move beyond a vision of the nation defined by the revolutionary beliefs of the educated middle class.

The reader who approaches Adichie’s novel for the first time comes across the first excerpt of *The Book* in the “Early Sixties” portion of the discourse. This excerpt opens with the story of the woman with the calabash whom Olanna encounters on a train headed back to the South during the Biafran war:

Olanna tells him this story and he notes the details. She tells him how the bloodstains on the woman’s wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve. She describes the carved designs on the woman’s calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes the child’s head inside: scruffy braids falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a

---

<sup>49</sup> Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. p. 233.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 233.

<sup>51</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 470.

small surprised O.<sup>52</sup>

The text does not offer information about Olanna's interlocutor and the scene foreshadows later events in the story. However, while the authorial *him* is left unnamed, the passage, when read in terms of the information the reader has recently processed, clues us in to the interlocutor's identity. Beyond having made his acquaintance, Olanna observes that Richard, who comes to Lagos with the express purpose of writing a book about Nigeria, "did not have that familiar superiority of English people."<sup>53</sup> The first excerpt of *The Book* conveys an air of cautiousness reminiscent of Richard's distress after he erroneously attributes the British concept of monarchy to the Igbo. It captures the speaker's unwillingness to compare the Biafran War to the contemporaneous Rwandan conflict of the early 60s: "[H]e mentions...the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled babies. But he is careful not to draw parallels."<sup>54</sup> Hesitant to conflate the regional and historical particularities that make up the African continent, *Half of a Yellow Sun* presents its readers with the image of an author who is wary of imposing a Eurocentric perspective.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the reader's ability to identify Richard as *The Book*'s author hangs on his ability to represent and think of Africa in non-essentialist terms. Richard is largely uncertain about how to represent Africa and its history. This uncertainty contrasts with a firm resolve to learn more about the history of Igbo-Ukwu art. Nonetheless, Richard's ideas about the achievements of African art seem to echo patronizing imperialistic judgments. For instance, although he longs to capture the "beauty" and "complexity" of Igbo-Ukwu art, he situates these cultural achievements within "an idyllic past" that suggests, as the poet Okeoma points out, that he "never imagined *these*

---

<sup>52</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. pp. 103-104.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

people capable of such things.”<sup>55</sup> Despite his cultural biases, however, the text works to redeem Richard. Moving through the text, the reader’s encounter with the second excerpt of *The Book* also serves to reaffirm the hypothesis that Richard is the author. The excerpt reflects a distinctly ironic tone that recalls Richard’s earlier frustration at being characterized as a patronizing foreigner by the poet, Okeoma. Adding to her tentative hypothesis, the reader concludes that Richard’s defensiveness is productively displaced in *The Book*’s comico-satirical representation of a British perspective:

The humid South, on the other hand, was full of mosquitos and animists and disparate tribes. The Yoruba were the largest in the Southwest. In the Southeast, the Igbo lived in small republican communities. They were nondocile and worryingly ambitious. Since they did not have the good sense to have kings, the British created ‘warrant chiefs,’ because indirect rule cost the Crown less.<sup>56</sup>

The author of the *Book* gently mocks the British who blithely decide to colonize the North since the climate was reasonably tolerable, the Hausa were superior to the Southerners in appearance and because Muslim beliefs were “as civilized as one could get for natives.”<sup>57</sup> Presenting Richard as responsible for *The Book*’s critique of a British perspective, the reader concludes that Richard’s response to the Biafran conflict is carefully attuned to the implications of an author’s positionality. Furthermore, Okeoma’s critique anticipates Richard’s successful transformation in the novel as it spurs Richard’s own acerbic critique of British imperialist policies that set the stage for the country’s violent massacres. This critique emerges in response to an article that appears in a fictional version of *Time* magazine. Richard interrogates its depiction of Nigerians as predisposed to violence and highlights a history of violence that originated in the divide-and-rule policies of British rule.

---

<sup>55</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 141.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 146.

Richard's efforts to present an unbiased and factual view of the Biafran War are included in the second section of the text, which actually deals with events, chronologically speaking, that occur much later in the story. Occurring near the very end of the story, it suggests the successful nature of Richard's evolution. The hypothesis that Richard is writing *The Book* only gains more plausibility as the story progresses. Because each of the excerpts the reader receives from *The Book* reflects distinct tones and styles it is likely that the anonymous poem that offers a scathing critique of the outside world's callousness and voyeuristic tendencies was inspired by Richard's own encounter with an American journalist: "Thousands of Biafrans were dead, and this man wanted to know if there was anything new about one dead white man. Richard would write about this, the rule of Western journalism."<sup>58</sup> Given that the text provides the reader with this information just a few pages before the poem, the reader would likely infer that Richard is, quite unambiguously, the author of *The Book*.

Marx ascribes an authorial role to Ugwu when he suggests that Ugwu's engagement in a developmental process of learning redraws the parameters of who may traditionally be considered an expert in "analyzing" and "managing" the failed state.<sup>59</sup> When he claims that "Ugwu's education is not only thoroughly sentimentalized but also rooted in a mentoring model that looks downright populist when compared to the university program for generating accredited experts," Marx overlooks the contradictory nature of this education.<sup>60</sup> Ugwu's narrative reveals how he imagines his relationship to Odenigbo. On one level, the polyphony of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a central yet unacknowledged formal facet of the novel's representation of a process of learning and mentorship, or what critics point to as the *Bildungsroman*-like education of the rather impressionable Ugwu by

---

<sup>58</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 462.

<sup>59</sup> Marx, John. *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011*. p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 72. Marx writes: "Although contemporary fiction reproduces certain aspects of political scientific treatment of state failure, it does not reproduce that discipline's international division of labor. Instead, it retools an identifiably novelistic approach to representing subjectivity as the means for introducing new sorts of local, and often unaccredited, expert participants in the project of administration" (65).

Odenigbo (also affectionately known as “Master”).<sup>61</sup> What Marx accords far less attention to, however, is that the information we receive about Ugwu’s formative experiences, within this polyphonic structure, is not what Adichie herself tells us about Ugwu. It is, instead, indicative of Ugwu’s perception as a fictional character, of his circumstances and what happens to him.

Therefore, the technique of focalization emphasizes what, in Ugwu’s mind, are possibilities opened up by Odenigbo’s desire to educate him, possibilities that reflect Ugwu’s desire for socioeconomic stability rather than intellectual distinction.

Ugwu’s self-conscious observations lay bare the tensions between his class identity and the education that he receives from Odenigbo. These observations or impressions implicitly redraw the social boundaries that Odenigbo, committed to an egalitarian and socialist view of society, refuses to acknowledge. The novel frames Ugwu’s development in terms of his relationship to his benefactor, Odenigbo. This “new life away from the village” holds, for Ugwu, an altogether unheard of level of material security and autonomy.<sup>62</sup> Despite the benefits and relative freedom of his new position (he has his own bed and is allowed to choose what they eat) Ugwu still obeys the principles of social hierarchy. For instance, while Ugwu is specifically instructed by Odenigbo to call him by his first name for “Sir is arbitrary,” he continues, much to Odenigbo’s frustration, to call him “Sah.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, although Odenigbo wishes to discard such markers of class difference, he also communicates that everyone, even the servants, has his place. Odenigbo’s comments on labor and efficiency inadvertently, perhaps, underscore this idea: “Outside is Jomo’s territory, and inside is yours. Division of labor, my good man.”<sup>64</sup> Ugwu respects this overarching framework of domestic order so much that he fears the possibility that Miss Adebayo or Olanna will “com[e] in to intrude and

---

<sup>61</sup> Susan Strehle agrees with Marx’s reading of the novel as “a bildungsroman focused on Ugwu’s education” (660).

<sup>62</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

disrupt their lives.”<sup>65</sup> The household, even when Olanna becomes a member of it, figures in Ugwu’s mind as a space whose integrity he must actively work to preserve. Ugwu views Odenigbo’s mother’s desire to marry Odenigbo to a girl from his village as something that would upset the balance of the household (and it arguably does). The household and its members become, therefore, an inextricable part of how he views himself.

Eager to maintain the status quo, Ugwu understands that the stability of his present circumstances rests directly on preserving Odenigbo’s goodwill. Furthermore, the key to cultivating this goodwill lies mainly in complying, at least outwardly, with Odenigbo’s program of intellectual growth, a program geared at gaining the knowledge needed to “resist exploitation.”<sup>66</sup> As the story suggests, Ugwu’s thoughts belie an uncertainty about Odenigbo’s grasp of this idea and the conditions that the exploited face. For example, when considering Ugwu’s standpoint, the reader perceives that the idea of “resist[ing] exploitation” remains, ironically, incoherent and elusive to Odenigbo and his circle of friends, who watch cataclysmic world events from the safety of Odenigbo’s private salon. Toasting to great feats of resistance to “that brave black American led into the University of Mississippi,” “To Cuba for beating the Americans at their own game!” and so on, the hollowness of such celebratory gestures is indicated by their sheer frequency.<sup>67</sup> Ugwu “would enjoy the clink of beer bottles against glasses, glasses against glasses, bottles against bottles.”<sup>68</sup> And, similarly, echoing the pleasant yet lofty sounding nature of these conversations, Ugwu does not fixate on learning the meaning behind the English words he hears but their external, musical qualities: “Stupid ignoramus slid out of [Odenigbo’s] mouth like music” and Olanna’s English was

---

<sup>65</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 26.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

like the kind “he heard on Master’s radio, rolling out with clipped precision.”<sup>69</sup> However, when Odenigbo visits Ugwu’s village to fetch his sick mother, Ugwu expresses his doubts about the possibility of bridging such prominent social gaps:

Ugwu suddenly wished that Master would not touch his mother because her clothes smelled of age and must, and because Master did not know that her back ached and her cocoyam patch always yielded a poor harvest and her chest was indeed on fire when she coughed. What did master know about anything, since all he did was shout with his friends and drink brandy at night?<sup>70</sup>

The passage, which highlights Ugwu’s sensitivity toward those around him, reflects the mixture of embarrassment and discomfiting awareness that he feels. More importantly, though, it calls into question the value of the knowledge that he has gained as Odenigbo’s student, for it is not knowledge that would prove useful within the context of village life.

Although the text’s motif of an individual’s education seems to minimize the distance between Odenigbo and Ugwu—a point taken up by Marx in his reading of the novel’s domestic sphere as the privileged site of “professional self-determination”<sup>71</sup>—various stumbling blocks emerge in the story that illuminate the facade of autonomy around this very idea of an educable self. If, as Neil Gibson writes of Fanon, “political education means precisely encouraging the people to think for themselves,” *Half of a Yellow Sun* renders ambiguous, on a first reading, the extent to which Ugwu expresses this level of autonomy and self-direction: “he made a show of reading [the books]” although he “did not understand most of the sentences.”<sup>72</sup> It is not only, however, Ugwu’s ambivalence and impressionable nature that throw the question of the people’s self-direction into

---

<sup>69</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 17; p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 114.

<sup>71</sup> Marx, John. *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011*. p. 66.

<sup>72</sup> Gibson, Neil. p. 125; Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 21.

question but the actual manner in which he fashions his own sense of self. Ugwu carefully studies Odenigbo's mannerisms in order to perfect what, in his mind, resonates with a picture of middle class learning. Ugwu's "show" merely reaffirms the performative aspects of this learning:

Master's voice rose easily, Ugwu had noticed, and by his third snifter of brandy he would start to gesture with his glass, leaning forward until he was seated on the very edge of his armchair. Late at night . . . Ugwu would sit on the same chair and imagine himself speaking swift English, talking to rapt imaginary guests, using words like decolonize and pan-African, moulding his voice after Master's, and he would shift and shift until he too was on the edge of his chair.<sup>73</sup>

Undiscerning in his imitation of what appears as hackneyed revolutionary rhetoric, Ugwu subtly indicates that Odenigbo's revolutionary views lack a firm grounding in material reality. Odenigbo's flaws become more visible in Olanna's account of their wartime experiences. Retreating into a state of calm tranquility during the war, Odenigbo's "forceful reassurance" that a free Biafra can be secured highlights his unwillingness to confront their impoverished circumstances.<sup>74</sup> Odenigbo's state of denial in which he educates villagers about "the great nation that Biafra would be" emphasizes his idealism and the way its repudiation of an uncertain future prevents action that addresses present limitations.<sup>75</sup>

Ugwu's experience in the Biafran army reflects the burden of a privileged selfhood, which cannot be sustained outside the context of Odenigbo's salon. Although Ugwu is dissatisfied with the dilapidated conditions of their new house in Umuahia, he is pleased that they are able to recreate the atmosphere of the academic salon in Nsukka. The visits of Odenigbo's friends bring the normalcy

---

<sup>73</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 328.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 328.



of the past into the present. Ugwu's admiration of Professor Ekwenugo, a member of the Biafran Science Group, sheds light on the kind of contribution that Ugwu hopes to make to the war. Professor Ekwenugo's contribution to the Biafran cause evokes the possibility of yoking intellectual gifts to the daily realities of the struggling nation. The advances he makes in military technology (the engineering of high-impact land mines and missiles) are celebrated as proof of the nation's intellectual might. When Odenigbo reveals that Professor Ekwenugo was blown up by landmines, the words "blown up" resonate sharply in Ugwu's mind: "*Blown up*. Professor Ekwenugo had always been his proof that Biafra would triumph, with the stories of rockets and armored cars and fuel made from nothing. Would Professor Ekwenugo's body parts be charred, like bits of wood, or would it be possible to recognize what was what? Would there be many dried up fragments, like squashing a harmattan-dried leaf? *Blown up*."<sup>76</sup> The fragmentation of Professor Ekwenugo's body emphasizes the incompatibility of grandiose intellectual ideas and the violent realities of the war. It also foreshadows Ugwu's discovery of the burned books from Odenigbo's library upon his return to Nsukka. Ugwu's discovery of Frederick Douglass's autobiography at the Biafran training camp highlights a fantasy of belonging in which social divides are bridged. Douglass's autobiography narrates the life of an educated slave whose privilege distances him from the majority of his counterparts. This distance is revealed in Ugwu's interactions with the uneducated teenage recruit, High-Tech. Although he is unable, as Ugwu observes, to properly pronounce the word *reconnaissance*, High-Tech demonstrates a levelheaded practicality that is lacking in Ugwu, who is shocked to find that Professor Ekwenugo's "glamorous" description of his innovative landmines fails to comport with its lackluster craftsmanship.<sup>77</sup> Ugwu's sense of difference is also sustained by his own impression that High-Tech seeks to impress him: High-Tech likes to listen to Ugwu, shares his food

---

<sup>76</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 444.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 451.

with Ugwu, and “looked pleased to have finally caught his attention.”<sup>78</sup> Ugwu’s uneasy negotiation of difference within a community of subjugated peers or slaves is captured in the following passage:

He had proved himself to the other men by how well he did at training, how he scaled the obstacles and shimmied up the rough rope, but he had made no friend. He said very little. He did not want to know their stories. It was better to leave each man’s load unopened, undisturbed, in his own mind. He thought about the upcoming operation, about blowing up vandals with his *ogbunigwe*, about Professor Ekwenugo’s blown-up body. He imagined himself getting up in the moonlit quiet, leaping out, running until he got back to the yard in Umuahia and greeted Master and Olanna and hugged Baby. But he would not even try, he knew, because a part of him wanted to be here.<sup>79</sup>

Although Ugwu longs for his peers’ acceptance, he is unwilling to completely relinquish the ideal of a privileged selfhood. Instead of relating to the other soldiers in terms of their own personal narratives, Ugwu remains aloof. The only way that Ugwu relates to his peers is through physical labor. The illusion that Ugwu can successfully unite a physical and mental self is broken when High-Tech uses the first page from Douglass’s autobiography to roll his weed. Ugwu’s rage at High-Tech’s obliviousness to the nature of his crime—the degradation of the idea of creatively restoring an authentic self—is displaced in his rape of the bargirl.<sup>80</sup>

The reader of *Half of a Yellow Sun* must reconcile Richard’s sympathetic portrayal with his pronounced repulsion at the thought of Kainene being touched by Madu’s “filthy black hand” in the

---

<sup>78</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 452.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 453.

<sup>80</sup> The rape of the bargirl recalls, within the context of the slave narrative, the reassertion of compromised male authority through the physical abuse of black women. Ugwu’s violent imposition of his physical will on the bargirl reiterates Ugwu’s inability to accept the reality of his circumscribed conditions.

final pages of the text.<sup>81</sup> Although Cooper suggests that this contradiction is unusual given that the novel points repeatedly to his grief for Kainene who has mysteriously disappeared, I believe that the contradiction is unusual for the way Madu, in the immediately preceding moments of the story, accords value to Richard's *ability* to contribute to the Biafran cause and, hence, "sanctions" Richard's authorship of the story of Biafra.<sup>82</sup> For Madu, Richard should contribute not in spite of his "white" perspective but because of it: "If you really want to contribute, this is the way you can. The world has to know the truth of what is happening, because they simply cannot remain silent while we die. They will believe a white man who lives in Biafra and who is not a professional journalist."<sup>83</sup> Richard's racist perception of Madu is striking for the way it systematically revokes any and all evidence that initially enabled the reader to view Richard as author of *The Book*. While Cooper and Marx suggest that Ugwu stands equipped to administer the state, their readings fail to fully address the impetus behind the novel's representation of Ugwu as the future hope of the nation. In order to better elucidate what appears to be the novel's seamless association of the people with the authorship of the nation's history, we must consider how the novel, seemingly intent on including Richard, emphasizes in its ending the lingering hold of a revolutionary vision of the nation-state and its unwillingness to register its dysfunctional characteristics.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard's experiences in Nigeria bring a double-sided view of the middle class into focus. Through Richard's views of Kainene and Olanna, the novel throws two divergent images of the middle class into relief. Scholars of the third-generation Nigerian novel have drawn attention to the way twins serve as a narrative device that may be read ambivalently,

---

<sup>81</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. p. 537. The final section of the text (Part IV) coincides with the story.

<sup>82</sup> He does so in Part II, which deals with the earlier events of the late 60s.

<sup>83</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda. p. 383. The title of *The Book—The World Was Silent While We Died*—takes its cue from Madu's words: "because they simply cannot remain silent while we die" (383).

“simultaneously performing new identities and revisioning old ones.”<sup>84</sup> Jane Bryce frames the figure of the twin as the intimate other half or feminine double of the protagonist in her quest for self-identity. While the sense of ambivalence and duality that this device produces is typically linked to the reversal of traditional gender roles it may also speak more broadly to other aspects of national belonging having to do, in the case of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, with the “performance” and “revisioning” of a middle class identity. Obi Nwakanma’s comments on contemporary Igbo literature in English, which defines the Nigerian literary canon because of its prominence, underscore this point. He observes that a “sense of unfinished nationhood or arrested decolonization” may account for why the contemporary Igbo novel expresses “a radically ambivalent and ironic stance” that speaks equally to “the slipperiness of Nigerian identity” and the need to fend off a lingering uncertainty about belonging.<sup>85</sup> In Adichie’s novel, this “slipperiness” has as much to do with class as ethnicity. If contemporary Nigerian literature continuously “articulates the difference between ‘collective identity’ and ‘autonomous subjectivity’—the dimensions of what Partha Chatterjee describes as the inner and outer realms of cultural experience,” then the doubled yet antagonistic figures of Olanna and Kainene reflect the desire to assert a more coherent view of communal identity, through the prismatic lens of class, within the larger community of the nation.<sup>86</sup>

The division that separates Olanna and Kainene reflects a wider ideological schism that pits global interests against those of the nation. Far from expressing great likeness of mind, Kainene and Olanna have “simply drifted apart,” and it is through Olanna’s focalized narrative that we learn of

---

<sup>84</sup> Bryce, Jane. “Half and Half Children”: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel.” p. 56.

<sup>85</sup> Nwakanma, Obi. “Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel.” pp. 7-8; p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

their polite tolerance of each other.<sup>87</sup> While Olanna longs for acceptance within Odenigbo's circle of like-minded revolutionary intellectuals and wishes that her family would "acknowledge the humanity of the people who served them," Kainene is more at ease with her upper middle class identity, expertly managing her father's building and oil contracts with potential foreign investors.<sup>88</sup> Olanna's fear that marrying Odenigbo would render theirs a "prosaic partnership," reflects her desire to achieve, like the meaning of her name, a "lyrical" happiness.<sup>89</sup> Absorbed in her work, Kainene does not depend on Richard: "hers was a life that ran fully and would run fully even if he was not in it."<sup>90</sup> Kainene's independence comes in the shape of her assumption of responsibility for her father's business interests, which revolve unambiguously around the negotiation of lucrative oil contracts. Although Richard is charmed by Odenigbo's revolutionary zeal, Kainene is dismissive of the out-of-touch "freedom fighter," who, she suggests, does not realize the incompatibility of socialist and Igbo beliefs.<sup>91</sup> Kainene's expression of her skepticism about the relevance of Odenigbo's beliefs reflects the indeterminate stance of the text about what will ultimately best serve the nation and promote its development.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard's desire for belonging in the soon-to-be-independent Biafran nation is articulated through his romantic relationships with Kainene and Olanna. While Kainene is often aloof, Richard is comforted by Olanna's tolerant and welcoming nature.<sup>92</sup> Olanna's forthcoming nature is contrasted sharply with Kainene's "inscrutability" and her proclivity toward

---

<sup>87</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 46.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 37. Kainene was "chasing a contract with Shell-BP" (169).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 65 and p. 73.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>92</sup> "He felt grateful that she had pulled him into the conversation, included him, and he was charmed by that quality of hers that seemed both sophisticated and naive, an idealism that refused to be suffocated by gritty reality . . . . But she lacked Kainene's melancholy mystique . . . She was mostly inscrutable . . . He ached to know what she was thinking" (82).

“brooding, insular” silences.<sup>93</sup> However, in *Olanna*, too, Richard detects something equally elusive and he attributes this quality to her unspoken communication with Odenigbo: “He saw, too, how Olanna sometimes blinked at Odenigbo, communicating things he would never know.”<sup>94</sup> Although he is admitted into Odenigbo’s revolutionary fold, Richard remains at its margins given the nationalistic sentiment that pervades the group’s meetings: their discussions revolve largely around the injustices wrought by the “great white evil” that is the colonial powers.<sup>95</sup> Richard’s opinion that Olanna and Odenigbo are “refreshingly different” is met with Kainene’s lukewarm response: “Her hand was lax in his and he worried that she would slip it away. ‘They’ve made it much easier for me to get used to Nsukka,’ he added, as if to justify his liking them.”<sup>96</sup> These moments of tension demonstrate that the novel constructs Richard’s character not only based on questions of race, but also in terms of his relationship to the middle class. If Ugwu subconsciously seeks belonging in what is essentially a revolutionary middle class Biafra, so does Richard, the working class writer, who quite early on speaks of his social displacement in England to Kainene: “Aunt Elizabeth was quite grand, you see, and I was the cousin from the tiny village in Shropshire. I started thinking about running away the first day I arrived there.”<sup>97</sup> This vision of uneasy class relations is not, of course, an indication of the similarity of British and African class systems. Nevertheless, it is telling for the way it frames Richard as a figure on the margins of Nigerian and British society who negotiates his belonging in a nation whose image of itself is divided along the lines of class.

While *Olanna*, from Richard’s perspective, seems to represent a point of access to a desirable but restricted social reality within the nation, Kainene seems, despite her elusiveness, to embody a

---

<sup>93</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 78.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p. 138.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76.

more realistic realm of belonging that intimates the possibility of preserving links to a memory of home located in rural England within an outward-looking and markedly transnational Nigeria. Although Richard cannot fathom why he is reminded of “the crumbling house in England” and, behind it, Housman’s “blue remembered hills” in “this tropical humid place,” his memory of the past (a past associated with the memory of his parents’ house) in unfamiliar surroundings reflects the possibility of establishing common links of belonging in Nigeria.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Richard realizes as he part ways with Olanna, after their short-lived affair, that although “[h]e had lost his fantasy...what he worried most about losing was Kainene.”<sup>99</sup> Significantly, Richard’s elaboration of a “fantasy” of belonging through Olanna is a function of her ties with Odenigbo, the center of an intimate revolutionary club who draws adoring and loyal followers like Miss Adebayo. Once again, the novel roots Richard’s desire for belonging in Kainene’s pragmatic embrace of an evolving Nigeria instead of Olanna’s revolutionary ideals. Although Olanna denies her reproduction of white people’s mannerisms when she is accused of “gawking at everyday things,” wishing to reinforce her place among the people of the rural North, Kainene makes no excuses for her association with foreign neoliberal business.<sup>100</sup> When Kainene disappears over enemy lines in order to trade supplies, the novel gestures, once again, toward Kainene’s practical reliance on a process of material exchange in the face of dwindling resources from the Red Cross. While Richard does not lament the loss of Olanna, who represents a fantasy of belonging to an insular group of revolutionary thinkers, he believes that he may establish a more realistic notion of belonging through his relationship with Kainene. The novel links Richard to the capitalist and individualist influences of an outside world that offers the possibility of expanding, in concrete ways, the horizon of material possibilities

---

<sup>98</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 97.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p. 295.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

available to Nigeria's inhabitants.

If the novel figures Kainene and Olanna as two complementary yet antagonistic halves of a larger unity—a representation that speaks to the narrative deployment of the figure of the twin who symbolize the protagonist's split identity or multiple selves—why is Kainene counted among the lost of the Biafran nation? The incomplete nature of the novel's concluding vision is a function of Kainene's disappearance and is captured by Richard's lament that "he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Olanna, despite the conflict-ridden nature of their relationship, "was certain that Kainene would come back," asserting, "in my next life, Kainene will be my sister."<sup>102</sup> Richard's half-vision and the seemingly irreconcilable nature of Kainene and Olanna's relationship, within the context of Biafra's failed independence, speak to a larger fracture in the post-independence nation's self-image. While Olanna, for Richard, speaks to a revolutionary vision of the African middle class entrenched in idealistic notions of social change, Kainene represents a resolutely pragmatic view of the middle class grounded in a globalizing economy. Kainene's disappearance after she decides to trade supplies across enemy lines symbolically represents the text's inability to reconcile these discordant views.

Ugwu represents the fundamental role of the people in remaking the history of the middle class. Through Ugwu, Olanna articulates the meaning of her story. Ugwu's role as both a witness and transcriber of Olanna's account frames his role within the larger conventions of the slave narrative, which was often relayed to and transcribed by an amanuensis. The amanuensis's power to shape a slave's autobiographical narrative or frame it within another context illustrates Ugwu's apparent capacity, as writer-intellectual, to imbue Olanna's narrative with credibility and authority. Ugwu's role as author serves as a buffer against the divisions plaguing the revolutionary middle class.

---

<sup>101</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 537.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 538 and p. 541.



While the novel strives to present a cohesive vision of the revolutionary middle class it betrays the troubled nature of relationships within it. The novel, through Olanna's relationship with Odenigbo, reveals the plight of more reserved individuals who, despite their desire to participate, hover uneasily on the margins of the revolutionary middle class. It is what Odenigbo represents—his desire for social justice, equality, an intrepid nature—that Olanna finds lacking in her own immediate circle. Yet, the actuality of war and the need for Odenigbo to reaffirm ties to his village community by obeying the wishes of his mother are immovable obstacles on the path to realizing the post-independence nation's dream of social progress.<sup>103</sup> Through Olanna and Odenigbo's tortuous love affair, the novel alludes to the exclusionary nature of a revolutionary vision of the nation. Olanna does not have a clear role to play. She is made to feel self-conscious, for instance, about her contributions to the salon's rigorous ideological debates. Miss Adebayo, a university professor, labels Olanna in terms of her class identity when she refers to her "proper English accent."<sup>104</sup> Although Olanna attempts to impress Miss Adebayo, a university professor who fawns over Odenigbo, but "suspected there was a glaze of unoriginality to all her ideas."<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, through Olanna, we see a commitment to faithfully expanding Odenigbo's commitment to educating Ugwu: Ugwu's role as teacher-in-training is, perhaps, the culmination of Odenigbo's efforts to provide the people with a political education. The burned remnants of Odenigbo's books are symbolic of Odenigbo's fundamental inability to translate his knowledge into a pragmatic scheme of action.

Although *Half of a Yellow Sun* seems to authorize the intellectual contributions of the people to the nation, it actually reinstates and revalorizes the contributions of an elite minority. For this

---

<sup>103</sup> In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna assumes caregiving responsibilities for the child of Odenigbo and Amala, the housemaid of Odenigbo's mother. The narrative's suppression of the reason for the growing distance between Odenigbo and Olanna and the circumstances that led to Olanna's care of Baby highlights an essential flaw in the revolutionary project of the middle class.

<sup>104</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 61

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

reason, authorship in Adichie's novel performs a corrective rather than a democratizing function. Ugwu's knowledge of Odenigbo's infidelity foreshadows the growing rift in the household. Even though Olanna makes peace with Odenigbo, the novel emphasizes her understanding that their past is irretrievable: she "sat thinking about how a single act could reverberate over time and space and leave stains that could never be washed off."<sup>106</sup> Returning to Nsukka after Nigeria declares its defeat of the Biafran army, Ugwu attempts to fix Odenigbo's "shapeless and tangled" house: "He wanted to clean. He wanted to scrub furiously. He feared, though, that it would change nothing. Perhaps the house was stained to its very foundation and that smell of something long dried would always come from the ceiling."<sup>107</sup> The outward decay of the house reflects the unraveled state of Odenigbo's dream of independence. Ugwu's inability to tolerate the sight of Master sprawled out on the ground in an "undignified" manner, and his unwillingness to entertain a vision of Biafran independence distorted by "invented hope," points to Ugwu's desire to protect the integrity of Odenigbo's revolutionary dream despite his feelings of disillusionment.<sup>108</sup> Rather than read Ugwu's triumphant assertion of authorship as an affirmation of marginalized knowledge or political subjectivity, we must read this narrative choice as upholding Odenigbo's Pan-Africanist dream by winning Biafra's independence. Ugwu's development is continuously filtered through the prism of the middle class's wartime experiences and his theoretical place within a project of national independence. In dedicating *The Book* to Master (Odenigbo), Ugwu consolidates the sociopolitical pact between the middle class and the people and preserves the revolutionary, albeit unrealized, aims of the middle class within the historical record. Although the war reveals Odenigbo's inability to take action, it is Ugwu's written dedication that symbolically reinstates his initial purposefulness by framing

---

<sup>106</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. p. 306.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 523.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 522 and p. 500.

Odenigbo as the original hope and hero of the nation.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* seems to elaborate a concept of nationhood that stretches across the boundaries of race and class. This unified vision of the nation is, however, challenged by the inconsistencies that permeate its polyphonic structure. Accounting for the tensions that emerge between the narrative accounts of Ugwu, Richard and Olanna reveals that the text does not actually surmount the challenges posed to a democratic vision of inclusivity. Ugwu's account makes visible his reservations about the viability of a revolutionary approach to Biafran independence. Nevertheless, the novel defuses these reservations in order to preserve the stability of the status quo. This shift illustrates the underlying affective hold of a more romantic vision of the nation-state and a nostalgic embrace of a final and fleeting moment of sociopolitical possibility. Rooted firmly in the past, *Half of a Yellow Sun* leaves its readers with an image of what *might* have been instead of what *could* eventually materialize.

### 3.3 Reinforcing Narrative Accountability: Cross-cultural Reciprocity and Rebuilding the Nation-State in *The Memory of Love* (2010)

*The Memory of Love* revolves around its characters' encounters with the vestiges of the decade-long Sierra Leonean civil war in which they gradually unearth the truth behind the failure of anti-government and student activist-led movements.<sup>109</sup> *The Memory of Love* represents two failed moments of student protest. The first is associated with Julius Kamara, an academic engineer and social activist, and never fully materializes due to his untimely death. The other revolves around a younger generation of Sierra Leoneans who are met with violent police reprisals when they conduct anti-government protests. These fictional events allude to the student-led protests of the 70s and 80s in Freetown. 1977 marked the nationwide student protest against the one-party government of Siaka Stevens. Similarly, in 1984, student protests against Stevens' dictatorial ambitions led to the closure of Fourah Bay College. In *The Memory of Love*, Forna, a Scottish-African writer who grew up in Sierra Leone and resides in London, reflects on present-day efforts to rebuild Sierra Leone. In *Memory*, the nation's future progress rests on the successful mental and physical rehabilitation of its population. Like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *The Memory of Love* represents friendships between individuals of diverse social and national backgrounds. The novel seems to set aside the constraints of national identity in order to project a commitment to the nation's welfare that is espoused in the name of professional responsibility. The narrative follows Kai Mansaray, a troubled Sierra Leonean surgeon who, burdened by an unexplained loss, struggles to assess the impact or value of his role in his fragile country. Educated and debating his prospects in the United States, Kai is drawn to the possibility of rebuilding his life abroad in America but is also unwilling to completely sever himself from his

---

<sup>109</sup> See Weinstein, Jeremy M. *Inside Rebellion*.

professional and national duties. The novel also explores the motivations of a British psychiatrist, Adrian Lockheart, who leaves behind an unfulfilling career and life in England. Adrian negotiates cultural differences and the politics of foreign aid work in alienating surroundings. He depends, initially, upon the company of his only private patient, Elias Cole, a dying man and former historian, who recounts his life story to Adrian. Cole tells the story of his love and obsessive passion for Saffia, a Sierra Leonean woman married to Julius. Through Cole, the novel highlights Julius's political activism and its consequences. Julius encourages, to the horror of the university's higher-ups, his students and colleagues to participate in anti-government rallies and meetings. *Memory* alternates between the reflections of Kai and Adrian, inviting us to think comparatively about their roles in Sierra Leone. The novel imagines a relationship between insiders and outsiders that is defined by tolerance and mutual respect. However, the novel's affirmation of a more restrictive view of nationhood, marked by Adrian's departure from Sierra Leone and Kai's decision to remain in his country, ultimately undermines the redemptive vision of professional cooperation that the novel gradually builds toward.

Elias Cole's narrative shapes an understanding of the polyphonic frame narrative that foregrounds Adrian's and Kai's perspectives. Adrian's narrative contains Cole's and moves readers into the political intrigues of the past just as swiftly as it moves them into the difficulties confronting the characters in the present. It is possible to pinpoint various congruencies between the events that make up the stories of Adrian and Cole. These thematic resonances, an effect that Gérard Genette attributes to metadiegetic narratives, causes us to compare and evaluate Adrian's actions as an outsider against Cole's. According to Gerald Prince, the metadiegetic narrative is "a narrative

embedded within another narrative and, more particularly, within the primary narrative.”<sup>110</sup> The “mirroring” effect that the metadiegetic narrative of *Memory* produces means that the reader must reevaluate the events comprising the narrative present (Adrian’s actions) in light of what happened in Cole’s past.<sup>111</sup> More significantly, what we read (what exceeds Cole’s metadiegetic narrative) is inflected by the ideological constraints, tensions and exigencies of retelling the past. Cole’s narrative, which has two interrelated functions—thematic and explanatory—suggests the possibility of a more inclusive vision of the nation while also providing insight into the novel’s restriction of national belonging. Firstly, Cole’s conversations with Adrian function together as a thematic mirror, forcing the reader to draw comparisons and contrasts between Cole’s story and the narratives of Adrian and Kai. The discerning reader will, therefore, seek to relate the two temporally connected and palimpsestic layers to one another. Cole’s narrative seems, through the thematic effect of contrast, to legitimize Adrian’s role in the nation and to validate the need for a more collaborative and pragmatic vision of social reconstruction that would, ultimately, restore the functionality of the state. To this extent, Cole’s narrative serves to lessen the ambiguity around Adrian’s position in the nation. On a second level, Cole’s metadiegetic narrative forecloses the vision of tolerance the novel establishes. In providing explanation, it resolves a temporary gap that emerges with respect to the events that mysteriously envelop his past.<sup>112</sup> In filling a gap in the story, Cole’s narrative acts as a thematic mirror, elucidating the primary narrative’s ethical concern about the role of outsiders in the nation.

---

<sup>110</sup> Prince, Gerald. *Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition). p. 50.

<sup>111</sup> Cole’s story indirectly shapes the reader’s understanding of Adrian’s experiences in Sierra Leone because of the distinct thematic echoes it creates. For example, the characters’ foreignness is signaled by the fact that both Cole and Adrian’s narratives resonate with the imperial adventure-romance.

<sup>112</sup> Although Gérard Genette assigns a total of three functions to the metadiegetic narrative only two of them pertain to the novels under discussion (thematic and explanatory). A metadiegetic narrative might work to clarify patterns of causality. It indicates “direct causality between the events of the metadiegesis and those of the diegesis, conferring on the second narrative an *explanatory* function” (232). This is one of the functions of metadiegesis we receive in *The Memory of Love* where the curiosity of Adrian about the history of his private patient, Elias Cole, is “only a pretext for replying to the curiosity of the reader” (Genette 232).

The novel contemplates whether the beliefs and expectations associated with foreign aid work can be overcome in order to implement a feasible plan of development that is attuned to the particularities of national experience. In doing so, the novel calls up the ethical dimension of Cole's narrative and asks whether his story and its events will dictate the outcome of Adrian's story. Cole's metadiegetic narrative undermines a vision of the nation rooted in principles of democratic reciprocity when it reveals that Cole has purposefully set forth a selective retelling of the past, and gives the reader his reasons for doing so.<sup>113</sup>

On a thematic level, Cole's story reveals the conflict between idealism and pragmatism that defines the problem of social reconstruction in order to point up the need to cultivate a more realistic approach to development. Even though Cole's cynical view of Julius can be attributed to a personal grievance (his inability to fully possess Saffia) it nevertheless suggests that meaningful social change can only take place if those participating in such efforts define change in concrete material terms. Although Cole longs to win Saffia's affection, the novel suggests that his desire for Saffia is truly a desire for social reciprocity and Julius's acknowledgment—an underlying attraction to his magnetic personality. For instance, after he accepts a ride to campus from Saffia, Cole notices Julius approaching the car: "When I shook Julius's hand I could tell he was struggling to place me. Just as I once considered it my misfortune to be unworthy of being remembered, so it is the misfortune of more charismatic types to be rarely forgotten."<sup>114</sup> Forgettable by nature, Cole's point of access to the self-possessed and indefatigable nation is Saffia. Like Cole, Saffia commands less attention than Julius whom she showers with concern and affection: "[Saffia] was not much given to talking, a

---

<sup>113</sup> Given his status as a first-person narrator, Cole's narrative must be considered in terms of the notion of narrative selection. The act of first-person narration implies a process of selection in which, for instance, the narrator may choose to emphasize or deemphasize certain pieces of information (See Phelan, James. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.)

<sup>114</sup> Forná, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 14.

listener by nature and by marriage...Everything revolved around Julius, or he behaved as though it did...But Saffia was the moon, emanating her own clear, magnetic energy. The one to whom all our stories were told.”<sup>115</sup> Although Saffia is deeply opinionated and is working to complete her PhD thesis in botany, Cole observes that she appears content to exist in Julius’s shadow. To the extent that Cole’s desire for Saffia reflects his own frustration at his own unremarkable nature, his impressions of Julius highlight a desperate plea for recognition. Cole’s critical outlook serves as a necessary, if self-serving, counterpoint to an unmoored and insular vision of state rehabilitation.

Cole’s characterization of Julius, who is deeply committed to the nation and its progress, allows the text to illustrate the discrepancy between Julius’s idealism and the need for more pragmatic strategies of development. Through Cole’s story we construct a portrait of Julius as a charismatic, free-floating idealist. Julius’s idealism manifests itself, most visibly, in his enthusiastic support for the 1969 moon landing. Unlike his friend Kekura who sees the moon landing as an exercise in political one-upmanship, Julius views the moon landing in terms of the wonders of technology and the collective efforts of a people to realize their humanistic potential. For Julius, these accomplishments put Africa’s own development within reach. The text emphasizes his belief in the capacity of black people, as a communal whole, to succeed when Julius raises a toast to the first black man on the moon. Like the skeptical Kekura, Cole sees the radio broadcast of the landing as an event that simply reinforces a “winner takes all” mentality and highlights Julius’s naïve optimism: “‘To fly,’ repeated Julius. ‘To test the limits of our endeavour, of our courage.’ He was serious. ‘Otherwise what point is there in being alive?’ Did I mention to you how young we were then?”<sup>116</sup> The novel’s motif of flight, present in the image of Apollo 11 and the “clapping” sound of “birds taking off,” used to describe the effect of Julius’s speech on his students, is symbolically

---

<sup>115</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 69.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 150.



inverted in the image of the tangled, black kite outside Cole's window.<sup>117</sup> Here, the text's association of flight with Julius and, therefore, his ambitious plans, seem to be prematurely eclipsed. The black kite also alludes to the destructive potential of Julius's steadfast commitment to this dream of progress. In Cole's eyes, Julius represents the fervent yet unsustainable revolutionary idealism of Sierra Leone's past. Indeed, for Julius, the landing of Apollo 11 is not another crude reflection of America's attempt to deflect the world's attention from Vietnam nor is it evidence of "the new scramble for Africa" in space.<sup>118</sup> Instead, it suggests the possibility of national regeneration. In *Memory*, the moon landing is an event witnessed by everyone and, notably, transmitted by the state broadcasting station where Kekura works. Cole observes:

All over the city people were gathering together...to listen to news of Apollo 11's progress on the radio. We were still at the Ocean Club when the announcement came that the lunar module would soon make the attempt to land. The proprietor ordered the music turned down, the room fell silent. Nothing except the hiss of static and the sound of the waves...The announcement came, followed by a short, black space and then the voice of the astronaut...Everyone in the room began to applaud and to congratulate each other. Even the proprietor, a miserly fellow by nature, was moved to order drinks on the house. The bartender sprang from stillness into life. Julius punched the air and shouted, "The Eagle has landed!"<sup>119</sup>

The radio broadcast brings the Sierra Leonean people together as they experience a shared utopian moment of historical change. Here, everyone, from the proprietor and bartender to Julius, finds themselves on common ground from which a shared desire for progress may be articulated. This

---

<sup>117</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 9.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

optimism resonates sharply with the text's fragmentary allusions to the pan-Africanist mood of the time, for there is not only talk of the first black man on the moon but also a purposeful assertion of solidarity in response to the call for recognition of the Biafran state. Constructing Julius's character from Cole's narrative is imperative to understanding the novel's view of the state because this view is closely connected to the revolutionary narrative of progress and social reconstruction that Julius represents.

For Cole, Julius's ambitious plans of development seem to culminate in a dream of the future altogether distanced from the actual material conditions of the nation. Cole's narrative monologue reveals the superficiality of Julius's revolutionary persona. While Cole accepts his aloneness and embraces his independence, Julius fears solitude and requires attention: "Space to think, time alone. These were the things I cherished. Not so Julius who, without the daily performance of his lectures and the adoration of his students, seemed bored."<sup>120</sup> The novel suggests, therefore, that Julius's energy is derived principally from other people who seem to prop him up. Julius depends on an entourage of eager followers, the loyal attention of Saffia who assumes responsibility for taking care of his health and even Cole himself who listens, as a captive audience, to his plans: "For my part, I listened, which was my role."<sup>121</sup> Julius's immersion in dreams of progress means that he disregards his own physical constraints. Cole observes that Julius repeatedly forgets his asthma medication (which is ultimately the cause of his death) because it was "too little a thing to fit in the scale of his imagination."<sup>122</sup> The triviality of his medication, which seems to hinder his focus on his goals of progress, emphasizes Julius's lack of attention to small but significant details. Ironically, while Julius carries around pieces of metal—engine parts, parts of buildings, nuts

---

<sup>120</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 109.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* p. 246.

and bolts—to explain certain principles to his students, these pieces do not add up to a more detailed or feasible plan of development. Furthermore, Cole’s reactions to Julius and his plans for social development are curiously circumspect as he shies away from his unrestrained idealism. That is, while others gravitate towards the enigmatic intellectual, Cole’s narrative hints at the way Julius’s revolutionary vision of progress subtly upends the integrity of a plan meant to secure the common good: “Julius had a way of seeing the world, full of glory, that served only to obscure the reality of it.”<sup>123</sup> In other words, Julius’s single-minded fascination with putting a black man on the moon, lessens the visibility of the most fundamental things that are required to establish a fully functioning society.

*The Memory of Love* seems to figure the possibility of creating meaningful social change in the nation as something that can only materialize once naïve idealism is overcome. Its tone of cautiousness is reflected in Cole’s narrative. While Julius’s idealism stems, in part, from a patriotic belief in the nation’s potential for growth, the novel sets up Adrian as a character whose idealism is defined by his foreignness and, therefore, his lack of knowledge about Sierra Leone. The novel treats Adrian’s idealism with more suspicion because it is not wholly clear whether it is grounded in honorable intentions. For example, Adrian’s decision to come to Sierra Leone is produced by a desire to bring his childhood dreams of adventure to life. The novel indicates that Adrian naively subscribes to a belief in his capacity to come to the rescue of a struggling population through his remembrance of imagined heroic achievements:

As a boy he had imagined his adult life as one of countless adventures. Early versions of the same vision saw him involved in the rescue of animals: a drowning dog, a horse with a broken leg. As his imagination roamed further from home, he saved

---

<sup>123</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 55.

wild animals from forest fires, or even from extinction. Later, the animals were replaced by a girl or a woman: his cousin Madeleine or his dark-haired art teacher. At night he dreamed of his art teacher, of acts of heroism, and of great journeys undertaken, of heights scaled, all with a kind of remote, fuzzy uncertainty.<sup>124</sup>

The injured and vulnerable animals as well as the female figures in distress that he imagines saving are projections of a fantasy of self-legitimization. When translated into reality, the pinnacle of this accomplishment lies in contributing to the rehabilitation of a people who seem to be in desperate need of assistance. The untenable nature of this vision of heroism is exemplified in Adrian's foolhardy pursuit of Agnes, a local peasant woman whom he believes is suffering from mental fugues. Adrian follows Agnes home in the hopes of persuading her to return to the clinic. Adrian's recklessness makes him a target of Agnes's son-in-law, who murdered her husband and with whom Adrian comes to blows. Agnes's refusal to speak to Adrian when he urges her to return is a potential indication of her fear that her son-in-law will punish her for seeking medical help. This sequence of events highlights Adrian's obliviousness about the potential repercussions of his actions. Kai rebukes Adrian for his actions, emphasizing Adrian's lack of awareness about the inherent limitations that circumscribe his efforts to help: "There's been a war. What do you expect? This isn't a game. The guy in that house doesn't give a damn that you're a British passport holder. If he needs to kill you, he will."<sup>125</sup> Similarly, when Adrian seeks out information about the kinds of services (occupational, psychotherapeutic, recreational) that are offered by the hospital, Dr. Attila's casual response suggests the trivial nature of Adrian's inquiries: "Of course. Ileana can deal with all that. Anything else you want, just ask."<sup>126</sup> Taking Attila's words at face value, Adrian believes that

---

<sup>124</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 62.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p. 218.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

infrastructural changes are feasible and that the clinic administers a wide variety of rehabilitative treatments designed to treat mental health problems in a gradual manner. Dr. Attila asks Adrian to reevaluate his expectations and the standards by which meaningful change is assessed: “When I ask you what you expect to achieve for these men, you say you want to return them to normality. So then I must ask you, whose normality? Yours? Mine? So they can put on a suit and sit in an air-conditioned office? You think that will ever happen?”<sup>127</sup> Dr. Attila’s questions subtend the novel’s call for a pragmatic approach to the nation’s problems. Given the variation in how a return to “normality” might be defined, Adrian’s oversights emphasize the need to reassess what help looks like and how foreign aid workers can achieve it.

Kai’s perception of building a meaningful life for himself abroad diverges from the novel’s depiction of Julius’s commitment to an idea of building that shapes the nation and its destiny. This idea of national building centers on the novel’s image of the peninsula bridge and the ways in which it seems to approximate a grandiose vision of progress encapsulated in the American moon landing. The novel contrasts Julius’s perception of the peninsula bridge as an overarching symbol of the dream of technological progress with Kai’s perception of it as a site of traumatic experience and stasis, which roots him in the past. For Julius, the peninsula bridge calls up the sheer potential of hard work in the process of development: “[the] [men] seemed to understand, elementally, the nature of the construction, though none could so much as read or write.”<sup>128</sup> Bringing the work of the men into focus, the text highlights the inspiration that Julius draws from the workers’ “elemental” intuition as “he had watched its construction every day for months. The columns of support being raised one by one.”<sup>129</sup> The construction of the bridge, in terms of its scale and

---

<sup>127</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 319.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

emotional valence, approximates Julius's reaction to the construction of the spaceship that enables mankind to embark on an exploration of space. While Kekura suggests that only "big men" profit from these extraterrestrial pursuits, Julius valorizes the sense of empowerment that derives from the building of the spacecraft:

For them maybe. But not for the men working to build these machines. They're doing it knowing that every day they are making discoveries—in science, technology, engineering. Not to reach the moon first, though that is what unites them. But because what they learn along the way will add to the sum of human knowledge. A century of work in a single decade.<sup>130</sup>

Julius idealizes the work of the men building the spacecraft and their ability to achieve great feats in a short time. His response emphasizes the larger-than-life scale of his expectations. These expectations, however, become illogical when placed in a national context that evokes a radically different and, perhaps, humble idea of progress. Here, progress is grounded in the mundane ideas of functionality, utility and accessibility. The bridge, therefore, has a discernible impact on the lives of ordinary people given that it ensures their safety and facilitates their mobility. In Julius's mind, however, the bridge becomes the touchstone of an idea of development that surpasses all human limits. This is evinced in his critique of the government: "At the present rate of development it will take a century to achieve what many nations manage in a decade."<sup>131</sup> The contrast that Julius establishes through his use of the words "century" and "decade" are indicative of the significance of development that is accomplished in a timely manner and the pressing nature to take action in pursuit of this goal. Kai's dream of the bridge (a place where rebel soldiers attacked him) lacks, unlike Julius's relationship to the bridge, a romantic component. It indicates the need to deal with

---

<sup>130</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 34.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p. 213.

the immediate suffering of humankind: “That night he dreams of the bridge. The railings pressed into his back. A face close to his. There is shouting. And pain, like a claw hammer at the back of his skull.”<sup>132</sup> While the bridge, for Julius, alludes to the possibility of catching up to the rest of the world in technological feats, Kai’s trauma, which prevents him from crossing the bridge, frames the bridge in terms of immobility and paralysis. It suggests that the psychological problems of the nation must be resolved before material progress can be made.

Cole’s skepticism towards Julius’s developmental plans seems to gain legitimacy through Kai’s imagination of a more grounded existence in America, which underlines the value of pragmatic and quotidian-centered solutions in dealing with dysfunctional state infrastructure. The possibilities associated with America loom large in the novel and manifest themselves in the letters Kai receives from Tejani, a university friend who settles there permanently. The inclusion of Tejani’s letters in the discourse work to interrogate Kai’s ability to successfully rehabilitate the nation’s weakest citizens: “Come, Tejani is saying to his old friend. Come. The word acts upon him all day, making him restless, like a grain of sand between skin and shirt.”<sup>133</sup> Kai expresses frustration with the antiquated and dysfunctional infrastructure of Sierra Leone when he contrasts his dependence on an Internet Café liable to server crashes and electricity outages to Tejani’s easy access to a personal computer. Instead of a frantic existence defined by Kai’s “searching for pinpoints of light” and his belabored avoidance of “dead ends and wrong turnings,” Tejani’s letters reflect something that Kai desires for himself: stability and a “new mood of confidence.”<sup>134</sup> While Julius views America’s technological progress as a reality within reach, Kai looks to America as a destination that promises access to the

---

<sup>132</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 237.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 94. In *The Memory of Love*, letter writing and the sea are motifs that point to the possibility of constructing a diasporic consciousness. Kai receives letters from his university friend, Tejani, who lives in America and wants Kai to relocate. The sea is often figured in relationship to lost possibilities in Kai’s third-person narrative: “He felt like a drowning man watching a ship sail by” (342).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p. 92 and p. 94.

basic necessities required for survival. Here, a necessary commitment to ensuring social development must be weighed against the repeated failure to secure the most fundamental aspects of daily human existence.

Against the lack of communication and honesty that defines Cole and Julius's friendship (Cole pursues Saffia without Julius's knowledge and Julius does not inform Cole that he is using his office to conduct political meetings), *Memory of Love* imagines the possibility of social rehabilitation through the formation of a collaborative and professional partnership between insiders and outsiders. The legitimacy of Adrian's pursuit of knowledge about Agnes's past that Kai perceives as a quest for the "Holy Grail" calls up the meddlesome role of foreign aid workers seeking to reaffirm their "unanchored" sense of self in a limited amount of time.<sup>135</sup> Here, the nation-in-crisis provides the foreign aid worker with a sense of purpose. However, Kai, too, forms a connection with Agnes's story as it comes to represent his own desire to come to terms with his trauma: "For a while Kai had dreamt even more than was usual. And though they were *his* dreams, *his* own experiences, to him they were in some way connected to Agnes."<sup>136</sup> Therefore, although Kai's story contains elements that are not transferable or reproducible, these elements still coincide with the experiences of others in the nation. Acknowledging this similarity becomes the basis from which, the novel suggests, Kai can fathom the nature of his own trauma. In other words, narratives, once treated in terms of their autonomous aspects, possess the capacity to illuminate the meaning of other narratives in ways that do not evince pure self-interest. The novel details Kai's efforts to help Adrian understand Agnes's problems as he seeks out information from the people living in Agnes's hometown. Although Kai does not initially inform Adrian of his efforts, Kai's interest in helping Adrian better understand Agnes's situation exemplifies the possibility of instituting an approach to trauma treatment that gives

---

<sup>135</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 219.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* p. 325.



equal priority to the narratives told by the people as well as the information culled from reference books. While Kai is “guided by Adrian’s markings and annotations” in *A History of Mental Illness* he is also guided by the narratives of the people themselves.<sup>137</sup> Kai’s respect for the integrity of the people’s narratives is evinced during his visit to the town where his cousin Ishmail lives. Ishmail directs him to a woman who gathers together people who know about Agnes:

Kai waited and listened without interrupting or speaking except to greet each new arrival, watch while they took a seat and were told what was required of them. He didn’t speak even when they faltered; he offered no solace but left it to others. Each person told part of the same story. And in telling another’s story, they told their own. Kai took what they had given him and placed it together with what he already knew and those things Adrian had told him.<sup>138</sup>

This scene highlights the multiplicity of stories that can be told about Agnes’s past: “This was Agnes’s story, the story of Agnes and Naasu. In hushed voices, told behind a curtain in a quiet room and in the eye of the night, from the lips of many.”<sup>139</sup> Choosing not to interrupt or speak for them, Kai’s stance reflects the autonomy that the speakers exercise. The overlapping of Agnes’s story with the stories of each individual speaker as well as the demonstration of empathy indicates that the healing of the nation can emerge from a spirit of communal solidarity. Although the text presents Kai in terms of his measured and intuitive approach to helping others, Kai’s trauma compromises his ability to perform surgery on his patients: “he’d been obliged—almost—to ask another surgeon to handle the task.”<sup>140</sup> Kai’s refusal to admit that his recurrent nightmares may require medical treatment preserves the illusion that outside help is not needed. This air of self-sufficiency means

---

<sup>137</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 325.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 306.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. p. 306.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 181.

that Kai initially disregards Adrian's suggestion that he consider certain relaxation techniques. Ironically, Adrian's use of a mode of therapy based on verbal communication works to alleviate the effects of trauma on Kai. Adrian's treatment of Kai through the use of hypnosis suggests, therefore, that Adrian's skills as a psychiatrist might have local relevance in Sierra Leone. His membership in the nation is signaled by the possibility of establishing reciprocal or complementary links of knowledge.

However, the ethically compromising nature of Cole's narrative denies the possibility of achieving social regeneration through transnational collaboration. At root, Cole's narrative is a story of betrayal. The reader eventually learns that Cole, far from an innocent bystander, helped pave the way for Julius's demise. Cole avoids and postpones disclosing the actual extent of his involvement in Julius's death. *Memory* demonstrates the power of Cole's first-person narrative to reconstruct the speaker's relationship to the past. To this extent, his narrative holds a moral valence. Specifically, in order to elicit Adrian's sympathy and absolve himself of guilt, Cole fashions himself as a victim of Julius's superficial behavior: "To him I was company, someone to be won over, simple as that."<sup>141</sup> And, indeed, while the novel eventually reveals that Julius pursues Cole's friendship with other intentions beyond friendship in mind, Cole's emphasis on Julius's manipulative and shallow behavior deflects attention from Cole's unsavory role. It is when Cole digresses from the main or overt subject of his narrative—Saffia—that we get a rare glimpse into the true nature of Cole's relationship with Julius. When Adrian asks whether the entangled kite outside Cole's window "struggl[ing] to break free" means something to him, Cole's narrative digression performs a revelatory function, moving us closer to the actual nature of the two men's relationship.<sup>142</sup> In this scene, Cole is reminded of his brother who, once "strong-limbed and solid" fell ill:

---

<sup>141</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 131.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

And there were times his happiness seemed designed to goad me, and I confess, occasions when left alone I vented my frustration on him. Don't ask me why I did it. A little childish jealousy. As an invalid he drew more of my mother's attention. The good thing is that my brother forgave me...And if you asked me did I love my brother, I would have said yes.<sup>143</sup>

In this passage, Cole positions himself as the victim of his brother's happiness. Most visible to the reader is the way in which the declining health of Cole's brother mirrors Julius's poor health. No matter how debilitated in health he is, Cole's brother still holds the upper hand as a child: "I sensed he felt something like pity for me, though it was he who lay there with limbs as useless as a straw doll's."<sup>144</sup> The image of his brother's silent confidence, pitying not himself but Cole, alludes to Julius's self-assuredness despite his apparent physical weakness: "He behaved as though the world had been made for him alone, a result of being constantly indulged, no doubt. Or perhaps also for so nearly having left it."<sup>145</sup> The attention that Cole's mother showers on his brother echoes Cole's description of Julius's magnetism. He is a life-giving force whose energy draws everyone to him: "He was the kind of person they call the life and soul of the party. Life and soul. Life *and* soul, without whom the rest of us collectively comprised nothing more than an inert corpse."<sup>146</sup> Indeed, the loss of such energy is destructive since Julius's death consumes Saffia who takes it upon herself to preserve the remnants of their past life together by reviving the garden in their old house. This undying loyalty to Julius—and, thus, the hope that Julius stood for—is emblematic of the idealism that characterizes the middle class's approach to rehabilitating the nation. Cole's signaling of the desirable nature of his brother's forgiveness underscores an underlying sense of remorse for the

---

<sup>143</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 53.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 108.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

cruelty he inflicted upon him. This is a forgiveness that he does not receive from Julius. Nevertheless, the alignment of Julius with Cole's brother represents the sense of repulsion and attraction that Cole feels in Julius's presence. As Cole concedes, "for a moment [he] was caught by his ardour" for social progress."<sup>147</sup> There is, beneath Cole's resentment, an admiration for Julius's unrelenting self-confidence. In contrast to his own reserved and "careful" nature, Cole observes that Julius's "presumptuousness was breathtaking. He had no fear of life."<sup>148</sup> There is, to this extent, something intrinsically compelling about Julius's idealism to Cole. Although Cole attempts to frame Julius in a negative light, his own narrative reflects the desirability of his traits. That is, in *Memory*, national belonging is premised on the ability to commit, without reservation, to a romantic view of social progress.

Cole's story underscores the problem of historical accountability in the text and the way in which ethically compromising acts derail the possibility of national progress. What lurks throughout Cole's narrative is his own accountability for the suppression of Julius's call for social reform. This call appears in Julius's "A Black Man on the Moon," a political tract seized by university authorities for its denouncement of the government's failure to implement an effective program of technological development. It is through his autobiographical monologue that Cole attempts to exonerate himself by concealing the true nature of Julius's death. This factual omission works to build up the impression of his innocence as he recasts himself as the victim of Julius's careless, self-serving actions. Presenting his story to Adrian, he suggests that Julius led him to believe that there was a shortage of university office space, while actually using Cole's to conduct political meetings. Falsely implicated in these activities, Cole insists that Julius betrayed him and, therefore, his eventual cooperation with the authorities was not unjustified. Even though he is rewarded with an

---

<sup>147</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 56.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

inconspicuous degree of academic success after acquiescing to the Dean's requests, Cole is able to conceal the full extent of his crime until Mamakay disabuses Adrian of her father's innocence:

He's using you to write his own version of history, don't you see? And it's happening all over the country. People are blotting out what happened, fiddling with the truth, creating their own version of events to fill in the blanks. A version of the truth which puts them in a good light, that wipes out whatever they did or failed to do... You're just a mirror he can hold up to reflect a version of himself and events... Whatever you say, you will go away from here, you will publish your papers and give talks, and every time you do you will make their version of events the more real, until it becomes indelible.<sup>149</sup>

Cole's revision of history in which Julius, rather than himself, appears to have precipitated his own demise allows Cole to reassert his own moral integrity. In Cole's narrative, the middle class appears volatile and unrealistic in its aims. Adrian's position as a naive, unsuspecting listener works to validate Cole's version of the past—a validation that his daughter, Mamakay, will not give.

Mamakay's sense that Cole, too, has betrayed her, further reveals Julius's significance as a figure who was part of a larger movement for social reform. Mamakay, a student at the university where Julius taught in the 60s, speaks of the violent reprisals by the police against the mounting wave of student protests decades later. It is when Cole orders her to remain at home the night when security forces raid the campus that she learns of her father's connection with Johnson—the man who, unbeknownst to her, was also responsible for Julius's death. The repetition of past wrongdoings suggests the far-ranging social implications of Cole's initial act of betrayal. That is, Cole's betrayal affects two generations of Sierra Leoneans, a fact that is marked symbolically by the deaths of Saffia

---

<sup>149</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 351.

and Mamakay. Julius's revolutionary character and ambitions come full circle in Mamakay; her social-consciousness and activism serves to link her to Julius, the students' energetic and ambitious leader. Her unwillingness to make peace with Cole illustrates the severity of his crime. For Mamakay, the imposition of particular narrative simplifies what is, in reality, a far more complex situation. Cole, like the civil war reporters who blithely dismiss the facts on the ground from the safety of their hotel rooms, evokes an imagined reality. According to Mamakay, the fact that no one "contradict[s] them" allows them to "write the same story over and over."<sup>150</sup> Cole's revisionist narrative threatens, through repetition, to diminish the truth of other historical accounts as it conceals the true nature of the nation's sociopolitical derailment. Instead of opening up a space for rigorous self-accounting on the part of the revolutionary middle class, Cole's narrative simply becomes an example of how the authorship of history is used to undo or conceal the outcome of a betrayal whose scope encompasses both the interpersonal and the national.

When *The Memory of Love* closes off access to the nation, it like *Half of a Yellow Sun* also offers up, in celebratory terms, a more redemptive vision of the revolutionary middle class. The novel ends on an overwhelmingly optimistic note, emphasizing Kai's continued mentorship of the local Sierra Leonean children who, along with Adrian and Mamakay's daughter, play contentedly with Kai's old stethoscope. The reader seems to intrude on this idyllic scene in much the same way that Adrian, earlier in the novel, observes the kinship between Kai and Abbas from a distance. The novel comes full circle in its final reference to "Julius's bridge":

Kai pushes the cassette into the player and leans back, one hand on the steering wheel. The sudden sound of the drum beat causes the children to stop playing with the stethoscope. They stand and squeeze themselves into the space between the

---

<sup>150</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 253.

front seats. *Well they tell me of a pie up in the sky.* They all see the kingfisher flash from a street lamp down to the water right in front of the car. The bird rises, a fish glints on the end of its beak. The little girl screams with pleasure. They do not see...as they cross the peninsula bridge, the letters traced by a boy's forefinger into cement on the far side of the bridge wall half a century ago, beneath the initials of the men who once worked the bridge. *J. K.*<sup>151</sup>

Echoing the scenes in which Kai and Abbas sing along to Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come," the novel recalls the song's lyrics for the final time. It conjures up the image of an unfinished battle against the exploitation of heavy-handed oppressors. Indeed, the closing pages of the novel produce a crescendo-like effect as the reader moves closer toward a totalizing vision of national solidarity. The novel mobilizes the image of perpetual struggle in Cliff's song in order to reassert the fundamental responsibility of the middle class to alleviating the oppression of the people. Here, without a doubt, the oppressors come in the form of unwanted foreign aid-workers and skeptical Cole. The bleakness of this unfinished struggle is tempered, however, by the resurgence of the novel's motif of flight. Building on the novel's imagery of flight, the closing scene uses the image of the soaring kingfisher to direct the reader back to Julius's fervent desire for social progress. Julius's ability to "make others believe [in his own destiny]" captures Julius's revolutionary persona as a leader of those around him.<sup>152</sup> While the end of the novel presents Julius as an idolized figure whose "dream of infrastructure" has yet to be borne out, the presence of his initials on the bridge reflects the enduring nature of that which Cole describes as a wondrous vision of progress: "In front of my eyes [Julius] pulled down the city and rebuilt it. Drainage systems. Buildings. Bridges. Highways."<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. pp. 444-445.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

Quite notably, it is a vision that depends, for its realization, on the middle class's express solidarity with the people, symbolized by the juxtaposition of the workers' initials and Julius's. In *The Memory of Love* it is the middle class who, quite emphatically, "author" the future story of the nation: Kai, therefore, must assume Julius's revolutionary mantle. Choosing not to rebuild his life in America, Kai takes his place among the Sierra Leonean people, a role that begins with his mentorship of a new generation. Free from the threat of oppression, the history of the nation's betrayal, encapsulated by Cole's authorial ellipsis, cannot possibly repeat itself.

### 3.4 National Belonging and the Middle Class

Unlike its newer fictional counterparts, *Anthills of the Savannah* forecasts political reform through its representation of successful social integration. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Memory of Love* seem to indicate that reform can be achieved if the nation's citizens are able to acknowledge differences based on class, gender, and race and view these differences as the necessary foundation for creating change. These novels, however, eventually assert that political change occurs through the commitment of a select few to the nation. This nationalistic commitment revolves around the responsibilities of the professional middle class and their mentorship of the underprivileged. In *Memory*, Kai's decision to remain in the nation despite his assertion that he has no plans to return is part of a renewed commitment to Abbas's education and the education of a younger generation of Sierra Leoneans. Adrian, quite simply, cannot fulfill this role because he does not share the intimate connection that binds survivors of civil war: "Both Kai and Mamakay had places from which all others were excluded, from which Adrian was excluded."<sup>154</sup> If Mamakay's relationship with Adrian signified the possibility of forging a connection based on mutual understanding, this possibility is

---

<sup>154</sup> Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. p. 391.



ruled out after she dies giving birth to their child. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu's authorship demonstrates how the novel romanticizes the contributions of an elite minority to the nation. In these representations of nationalistic commitment, the middle class appears to express solidarity with the nation's people.

*Anthills of the Savannah*, however, shows that the middle class elite should not elide social differences in the interest of creating solidarity. *Anthills* notes that the tendency to elide difference stems from a romanticization of the people by an intellectual elite who, while taking on the responsibility of acting or speaking on the people's behalf, is altogether distanced from their particular reality. Moreover, the ideas of the revolutionary intellectual class lack meaningful application in terms of social reform because they threaten to mask the oppressive conditions that the people face. *Anthills* traces a trajectory of increasing self-awareness—an effort to close a gap between an imagined reality and concrete circumstances. Contrastingly, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Memory* idealize the middle class's contribution to political reform instead of acknowledging the problems that characterize this contribution. While they gesture toward the openness of the nation, their formal nuances reveal the limitations of the affective relations they depict, underlining the difficulties of exceeding a view of the nation defined by a capable and elite group of male intellectuals. Therefore, by attributing a democratic principle (that seeks to promote the subjectivity of marginalized individuals) to these novels, critics like Marx and Cooper tend to ascribe an unambiguously revolutionary function to the new literature.

*Anthills* suggests that the inadequacies of political reform reveal a moral blindness on the part of the middle class: such failures allude to an inability to recognize the humanity and grievances of those who are not immediately aligned with a national majority. Despite a desire to extend recognition, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Memory* raise the spectre of ethical wrongdoing where these others

are concerned. The ethical horizon of these novels revolves around authorship, both figurative and literal. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the need to preserve a narrative of a united class-based front causes the novel to instill moral boundaries that set apart a racially defined “us” and “them.” Similarly, in *Memory*, the anxiety around a figurative kind of authorship is a result of the underlying threat posed by narrative retellings that undermine the viability of middle class intellectuals’ contributions to reform. Cole’s narrative highlights a deliberate withholding of information. The unreliability of this narrative stems, first and foremost, from personal hubris and a sense of moral infallibility. However, the egoism that this unreliability betrays also conjures up an image of the misunderstood and overlooked outsider who, hovering on the periphery of the nation, desperately seeks to inhabit a sphere of belonging that is, frustratingly, closed off because of its single-minded fascination with a romanticized vision of change. *Memory* repeatedly highlights Cole’s desire to live Julius’s life: “I let go of my self-imposed restraints and allowed myself to fantasise, to think what it might be like. That this was all mine, my home, lit up against the night.”<sup>155</sup> Cole’s jealousy emphasizes the unattainability of this charmed and privileged existence.

Appearing to work on behalf of marginalized figures, the middle class of Adichie and Forna’s novels altruistically strive to secure the “common good” through a self-proclaimed commitment to national development. Postcolonial critic Michael Rubenstein calls attention to the way the representation of public works (water, gas and electricity) calls up the power of the state: when these utilities function, the more benevolent or democratic aspects of the state are revealed. The nature of public works, notes Rubenstein, is ambiguous for they are “a part of, yet apart from, the capitalist system: a supplement.”<sup>156</sup> Similarly, they are “on the one hand those ‘things’ that are prerequisite for the existence of the ‘great society,’ and on the other those ‘things’ that result from the existence of

---

<sup>155</sup> Aminatta, Forna. *The Memory of Love*. p. 187.

<sup>156</sup> Rubenstein, Michael. *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*. p. 4.

the ‘great society.’”<sup>157</sup> In *The Memory of Love*, realizing “the great society” that Julius associates with the United States is not possible given the absence of basic amenities: references to electricity outages pepper the novel. Yet, the only hope that remains in the face of the novel’s dystopian representation of public utilities and, hence, the state, is the revolutionary dream of the middle class. Rubenstein’s claim that the “teleological arc of personal development” for the postcolonial writer culminates in “taking on the role of developer, with all the Faustian risks and tragic potentialities that the role implies,” highlights a façade of invulnerability and self-sufficiency in which the individual appears as the primary agent of the nation’s fate.<sup>158</sup> In the new African novel, this responsibility is inextricably tied to self-image and articulated along the lines of class. The middle class shoulders the burden of rehabilitation. In *Memory*, for example, the creation of a national consciousness that holds up the union between the people and the middle class is solely dependent on the ability of Julius and Kai to articulate a utopian promise of modernity contained in the material culture of public works. The ideological shift of Forna’s novel towards a more insular view of the nation-state functions as a direct counterpoint to the more “realistic” and perhaps unappealingly pragmatic view of state alluded to in Cole’s narrative. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, such skepticism originates in the people itself. Nevertheless, this skepticism wanes inasmuch as the people’s identity is largely a product of and, therefore, dependent on the recognition of the middle class elite.

Adichie and Forna’s novels seem to articulate a capacious understanding of what the nation-state should look like and to signal the possibility of its materialization. In these novels, the narratological effects produced by temporary gaps and metadiegetic narratives determine our ultimate response to the ambiguities surrounding the problem of authorship in the novels’ multi-

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

voiced narratives. Since both of the novels open up the possibility of a more inclusive nation-state, these formal effects allow us to grasp the extent to which the novels' unconscious attempts to move beyond a traditionally nationalistic narrative about the post-independence state are met with success or simply undone. Ultimately, the novels reflect the inescapable hold of an anticolonial narrative of the nation-state. This narrative subdues recognition of the schisms within the middle class. It proclaims its responsibility for cultivating the people's political consciousness, and it privileges an idealized conception of the middle class and their commitment to securing the common good. In these novels, the middle class seems to anchor its identity and sense of purpose in the people, which reaffirms its integral role in the state's reconstruction. In these novels, the middle class and the people take their places in a narrative of struggle, expressing solidarity against the injustices of the state. The highly contested nature of authorship in these novels throws the impractical goals of their middle class characters into relief. Nevertheless, the resolutions that the novels present resurrect a nationalistic ideology by diffusing the class-based contradictions that *The Book* and Cole's life story illuminate.

## Chapter 4: Round and Round We Go Again: The Neocolonial Paradigm in Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect* Trilogy

In a *New York Times* review of Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, American novelist Lorraine Adams praises a younger generation of African writers when she observes that they “are unafraid of depicting the vicious violence Frantz Fanon’s ‘wretched of the earth’ are capable of and showing how Fanon’s colonially oppressed grew into master oppressors themselves.”<sup>1</sup> However, Adams qualifies this praise, observing that “[t]hese writers have yet to achieve the magisterial command of this dark terrain that Nuruddin Farah has superbly accomplished in his two trilogies about Somalia.”<sup>2</sup> Adams provides some indication of the distinction between Farah and his younger counterparts when she highlights Mengiste’s static representation of her characters. For instance, Adams observes that Mengiste’s portrayal of her characters is often neatly framed in stark moral terms despite the presence of a deeply intricate and confusing political situation. Adams’s wariness of the “schematic” clarity that Mengiste “inadvertently” brings to what “was a confusing time” in Ethiopia highlights what, in Farah’s work, constitutes a productive ambiguity, especially with respect to his representation of diasporic citizens and how they negotiate, in complex and contradictory ways, their relationship to the troubled nation-state.<sup>3</sup> If younger writers of the African diaspora are increasingly unable to imagine the rehabilitation of the state along democratic lines, how does Farah,

---

<sup>1</sup> Adams, Lorraine. “Battle Scars.” January 3, 2010. *The New York Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See Alden, Patricia. Ed. Bernth Lindfors. *Nuruddin Farah*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999. Indeed, Patricia Alden suggests that Farah’s concern with individuals’ hardly straightforward “negotiation of autonomy” directs his approach, “guiding his treatment of every relationship and every social formation, from the family to the nation” (Alden ix).

regarded equally in terms of his cosmopolitanism and his commitment to representing the political conflicts that besiege Somalia from the vantage point of exile, position himself with regards to the state?<sup>4</sup> Reviews of Farah's work appear frequently in the *New York Times*, and he is often received as the voice of Somalia. What, in particular, sets Farah apart so clearly from his younger counterparts and their adept representation of Fanonian narratives, which continue to exert a powerful grip on a largely western audience?<sup>5</sup> In Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy—*Links* (2003), *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2011)—the lines of national belonging are blurry, at best. Therefore, the novels do not readily explain dissent or loyalty in political terms. Instead, ethics define and encompass the political landscape of Farah's work. It is not the product of political affiliation but rather the essence of politics itself.

This chapter elucidates the trajectory of increasing disillusion that each novel in Farah's trilogy establishes with respect to rebuilding the Somali state. I explore how Nuruddin Farah uses the figure of the diasporic citizen and exile to highlight the politico-ethical dimensions of global identity. Farah's characters are constantly at pains to determine their role as global citizens in the politically volatile Somali nation-state. I examine the ways in which Farah uses the discursive traits of the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial adventure novel to illustrate the contradictions that emerge in his characters' attempts to forge ties with the nation-state from a global vantage point but chart a trajectory of increasing political disillusion. Farah's repeated use of the tropes of the imperial adventure novel, which appears to straightforwardly align his characters with the neocolonial, allows him to cultivate the ambiguity of the diasporic citizen's claims with respect to the rehabilitation of the state. This ambiguity does not foreclose the possibility of political renewal. Indeed, it works to

---

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Appiah writes of Farah that he "has written largely about one place—Somalia—yet manages to sustain a cosmopolitan vision" (54). See "Nuruddin Farah," Spring 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Dinitia Smith takes up his work in her 2004 *New York Times* essay, "A Somali Author as Guide to a Dantean Inferno."

reaffirm the lingering relevance of the state to the welfare of individuals. Therefore, Farah makes a case for the irreplaceability of the state while also acknowledging the obstacles that accompany the path to statehood. In *Links*, for example, Farah elucidates the potentially productive role of external actors in the road to state rehabilitation. Similarly, in *Knots*, Farah continues to foreground the necessity of upholding the African state as a viable mediator in the quest to realize individual and collective autonomy.<sup>6</sup> However, the final installment of his trilogy, *Crossbones*, provides an increasingly unrealistic view of the diasporic actor and his or her relationship to the nation-state. The novel represents the culmination of repeated and increasingly laborious attempts to gain insight into the conditions that obstruct sociopolitical reconstruction. Ultimately, *Crossbones* highlights a belated recognition of state failure through its inability to rescue a received image of the state from its position in a space of literary and global media-based production.

---

<sup>6</sup> Farah is an outspoken critic of the Somali government. See “Somalia’s Leader: Look Past the Hype” in the *New York Times* Op-Ed section.

## 4.1 The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Imperial Adventure Novel and The Language of English Liberal Reason

The characters of Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy display a structural affinity with the late imperial adventure novel. His work appropriates what Laura Chrisman terms the discourse of "imperial legitimation," the use of rationality in order to legitimize a nebulously defined and self-aggrandizing mission.<sup>7</sup> Farah uses the conceptual paradigm of nineteenth-century liberal rationalism to highlight the contradictions that define the middle-class exile's negotiation of a globally situated self with respect to the nation-state. This negotiation of belonging and legitimacy in unfamiliar settings causes Farah's characters, to varying degrees, to display rationalistic tendencies characteristic of figures like Cecil Rhodes who, in particular, gave voice and political currency to the discourse of English Liberal reason in Africa during the late nineteenth century, and his fictional counterpart, Allan Quatermain, the fortune-seeking hero of H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. Published in 1885, *King Solomon's Mines* demonstrates the continuous grounding of imperialist strategy in the rhetorical language of liberal reason. This language was employed by the self-proclaimed Liberal Cecil Rhodes, who saw the collaboration of the Afrikaner Bond, the political party representing the Dutch majority in the Cape, as vital to ensuring the success of his territorial designs. The Jameson Raid that anticipated the Second Boer War provoked Haggard's own fascination with Rhodes who, although patriotic in Haggard's eyes, exhibited a single-minded desire to realize his personal ambitions in the Transvaal.<sup>8</sup> Rhodes's imperialist ambitions, whose realization depended on forging links of solidarity with the inhabitants of a distant nation, mirrored those of Haggard's wily fictional

---

<sup>7</sup> Chrisman, Laura. *Rereading the Imperial Romance*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000. p. 5

<sup>8</sup> See Haggard, H. Rider. *The Days of My Life* (1926), Volume II. Haggard wrote of Rhodes: "His was one of those big, mixed natures of which it is extremely difficult to form a just opinion. My own, for what it is worth, is that he loved his country and desired above all things to advance her interests; also that he was personally very ambitious. He set great ends before himself and went to work to attain them at any cost."



protagonist who goes to great lengths to secure his private interests in the fictional Kukuanaaland.

Quatermain's private interests are rooted in his desire to allay an uncertainty around class identity. Quatermain seems to eschew markers of class privilege. He notes that he was engaged in more practical tasks like trading when other boys of his age were receiving an education.

Quatermain's recognition of his newfound wealth is laden in ambiguity and evasion: "It is a big pile now I have got it—I don't yet know how big—but I don't think I would go through the last fifteen or sixteen months again for it; no, not if I knew that I should come out safe at the end, pile and all."<sup>9</sup>

Quatermain's discomfort stems from an inability to locate this "big pile" of wealth in relationship to the narrative of lower middle-class practicality that he proudly elaborates. Yet the prudent

Quatermain agrees to assist the aristocratic Sir Henry in his efforts to recover his missing brother, Neville, who disappeared in the African interior. Despite his agreement to help Sir Henry,

Quatermain works to ensure, to his own benefit, the attainment of an objective that will augment the material foundations of an elusive class identity: the gentleman. *King Solomon's Mines* plays out

Quatermain's desire to legitimize the means through which he secures, in ways that deviate from the code of honor and morality of gentlemanly status, his big pile of wealth: "I, Allan Quatermain, of Durban, Natal, Gentleman, make oath and say—That's how I began my deposition before the magistrate, about poor Khiva's and Ventvogel's sad deaths; but somehow it doesn't seem quite the right way to begin a book. And, besides, am I a gentleman? What is a gentleman? I don't quite know, and yet I have had to do with niggers—no, I'll scratch that word 'niggers' out, for I don't like it."<sup>10</sup>

Quatermain's monologue reveals his uneasiness about the possibility that he has compromised the integrity of gentlemanly identity. Moreover, Quatermain begins his tale with what amounts to a self-incriminating account of the violence he has encountered. Quatermain's narrative is, therefore, one

---

<sup>9</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon's Mines* (2007). p. 9

<sup>10</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon's Mines* (2002). pp. 10-11.

of self-defense.

Haggard's British adventurers rely on the strategic deployment of a rhetorical language of reason that reinforces a staunch commitment to pragmatism in the service of a cause. This language manifests a progress-oriented vision that involves the legitimate implementation of an orderly reality. The following excerpt of Cecil Rhodes's letter to the leading officials of the Afrikaner Bond highlights the centrality of pragmatism and a detail-oriented approach to realizing a particular goal. It presents an overture to establishing co-dependence between disputing nations, affirming the rational premises for unity by critiquing their reliance upon an ineffective "sentimental arrangement" instead of developing a strategy founded on "a practical basis":<sup>11</sup>

It took me twenty years to amalgamate the Diamond Mines. That amalgamation was done by detail, step by step, attending to every little matter in connection with the people interested; and so your union must be done by detail, never opposing any single measure that can bring that union closer. . . . In connection with this question I may meet with opposition; but if I do, I shall not abandon it.<sup>12</sup>

For Rhodes, the manifestation and consolidation of this "practical basis" relies on an unfailing adherence to "one powerful rule": "you must never abandon a position."<sup>13</sup> Rhodes, therefore, fashions an image of the steadfast, determined and meticulous patriot who slowly but surely ensures the advancement of national interests. He uses this image to reiterate the benefit of paying attention

---

<sup>11</sup> Verschoyle, F. *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches*, 1881-1900. p. 269. Rhodes ignored all characterizations of the Afrikaners as "anti-British", and his assertion to the Bond politician Hofmeyr of the strong mutual respect between the British and Dutch elicited Hofmeyr's declaration of their "common cause." Despite Hofmeyr's concession, these strategic moves would continue as Rhodes, in response to claims that he opposed the independence of the Transvaal, sought to convey his support of an internal self-government to the Afrikaner Bond.

<sup>12</sup> Verschoyle, F. *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches*, 1881-1900. pp. 274-275.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 269

to each and every “detail” of the process toward political unification. In doing so, he aims to generate a fixation with “detail” that will guarantee the success of each and every measure in line with this “grand central idea.”

Quatermain’s painstaking consideration of “the necessary preparations” for the trip exemplifies the “practical” approach to the accomplishment of his mission that Rhodes expressed. Quatermain, “who make[s] no apology for detailing at length” the “important point[s]” of these preparations, falls into the mold of the practically-minded Rhodes, leaving no stone unturned in his efforts to realize “[his] purpose.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Quatermain’s detail-oriented and meticulous preparation for this precarious adventure reiterates the centrality of practical measures in the ultimate realization of the trio’s goals. Sir Henry also shares Rhodes’s single-mindedness and non-defeatist posture. For example, although Sir Henry “meets with opposition” from the “cautious” Quatermain, who proclaims that it is unlikely they will survive the journey, he and Captain Good do not abandon their original course.<sup>15</sup> These behaviors shun uncertainty and logistically determine the direction that the imperial adventurers’ mission will take.

Rhodes’s elaboration of a progress-oriented vision that highlights the urgency of fulfilling a central and inviolable duty is also a guiding force for Quatermain. Rhodes’s interest lay in the northern territories of Mashonaland and Matebeleland (now Zimbabwe), which he hoped to open up to imperial expansion. Rhodes indicates that he feels his duty is the unification of new northern territories with the Cape Colony and, hence, the creation of a unified South Africa. For Rhodes, the colonizing nation’s ability to inhabit certain (desirable) locations demands the territorial unification and the institution of a self-governing community in the northern territories: “[T]he sentiment and object of the Afrikaner Bond is ‘union’ (although you have not stated it in so many words) ‘south of

---

<sup>14</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2002). p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

the Zambesi.’ I say south of the Zambesi, because I have discovered that up to there a white human being can live, and wherever a white human being can live, that country must be changed inevitably into a self-governing country.”<sup>16</sup> Suggesting that white communities should settle where they can, Rhodes indicates that their capacity for self-realization is measured in terms of self-government. In *King Solomon’s Mines*, Quatermain presents the “reasons” and “terms” behind his decision to assist Sir Henry in the recovery of his brother.<sup>17</sup> While Quatermain expresses some reservation, Sir Henry ultimately overlooks it in favor of maintaining a course directed at the resolute fulfillment of the liberal ideal of progress:

Mr. Quatermain...your motives for undertaking an enterprise which you believe can only end in disaster reflect a great deal of credit on you. Whether or not you are right, time and the event of course alone can show. But whether you are wrong, I may as well tell you at once that I am going through with it to the end, sweet or bitter.<sup>18</sup>

The weight of Quatermain’s cautionary words deteriorates under the pressure of Sir Henry’s unrestrained approach. Sir Henry displaces the “credit” that he attributes to Quatermain’s motives onto his own noble and unmitigated desire to complete the pursuit of a dangerous enterprise. What is more problematic, perhaps, is that they cannot yet know the outcome of this adventure, and, therefore whether Quatermain’s dire predictions will prove correct. Haggard critiques the evolution of a naïve faith in guaranteed progress that eased doubts regarding the dangers of expansionist and imperialist schemes.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the minute possibility of success mitigates the group’s growing despondency as they unsuccessfully attempt to chart a course towards the elusive Solomon’s mines

---

<sup>16</sup> See Verschoyle, F. *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches*, 1881-1900. pp. 272-273.

<sup>17</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2002). p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Cassels, Alan. *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World*. p. 108.

in search of Sir Henry's brother. Stumbling across the desert in search of water, they decide to take refuge in a cave where they come across a dead body, which Good identifies as the explorer Jose de Silvestré (who, thirty years ago, drew a map of Solomon's mines that is now in Quatermain's possession). Quatermain's doubts about the truth of Good's claim that the skeleton they have encountered belongs to the mythical figure of Jose de Silvestré are met by Good's systematic reasoning aimed at proving his claim:

And what is there to prevent his lasting for three  
thousand years in this atmosphere I should like to know?"  
asked Good. "If only the air is cold enough flesh and blood  
will keep as fresh as New Zealand mutton for ever...No doubt  
his slave, of whom he speaks on the map, took his clothes and  
left him...Look here...here is the 'cleft-bone' that he used to  
draw the map with."<sup>20</sup>

Good's speech, which borrows from the realm of the scientific, elevates the experience of the men to the status of "extraordinary" and "semi-miraculous" and dispels Quatermain's initial "doubt about the matter."<sup>21</sup> The imminent success of their seemingly "impossible" venture fills the men with "unreasoning joy" as uncertainty is subdued by realized progress: "the magic of the place, combined with the overwhelming sense of dangers left behind, and of the promised land reached at last, seemed to charm us into silence."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the imperialist trio's achievement of progress generates positive feedback, vague here, which reaffirms the value of taking risks.

The trio's risky actions are often products of affective persuasion rather than reason. In the

---

<sup>20</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon's Mines* (2002). p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 101, p. 109.

novel, the trio encounters the Zulu native, Umbopa. Although he is taken on as a servant, Umbopa is revealed to be the rightful but dispossessed king of the Kukuana people (Ignosi). The trio agrees to confront Twala, who has wrongfully usurped Ignosi's position as king, in order to restore him to the throne. A group of friendly tribal leaders asks Quatermain, Sir Henry and Captain Good to prove Umbopa's legitimacy through a display of the magical powers that they attribute to white men. The trio agrees to comply with the group's wishes during a dance ceremony in which Twala will sacrifice a young woman to the gods. They tell the tribal leaders that they will prove their power by "darken[ing] the sun"--a dramatic event that conveniently coincides with the next solar eclipse. Here, magic and the supernatural is grounded in the scientific.<sup>23</sup> Quatermain's plan, which consists of waiting for the passing of the eclipse, relies on the scientific evidence cited by Captain Good. Notably, Good's almanac provides a rational yet wholly subjective basis for action: "eclipses always come up to time; at least, that is my experience of them."<sup>24</sup> Although the group's plan is purely based on self-interest because the successful restoration of Ignosi to the throne will open up the opportunity for their unfettered access to the lucrative mines, the group also seizes the chance to lend affective force to their claims. When Twala asks Quatermain to identify the girl he thinks most attractive, he foolishly points to a girl who then becomes the chosen object of Twala's cruel intentions. In urging Quatermain, who waits patiently for the eclipse, to take immediate action against Twala, Sir Henry refers to the imminent death of the girl: "[Y]ou must risk it now, or the girl will be killed."<sup>25</sup> In doing so, he pits reason and caution against the demands of a moral conscience. His reference to the potentially fatal consequences of Quatermain's failure to act supplies Sir Henry

---

<sup>23</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon's Mines* (2007). p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135.

with the emotive “force of [his] argument.”<sup>26</sup> Haggard thereby gestures at the establishment of an imperial culture of risk-taking that creates a temporal illusion of imperative need (“now’s your time...you must risk it now, or...”) to encourage immediate and blind-sighted involvement in the conflict at hand.<sup>27</sup> The trio’s rescue of Twala’s would-be victim, Foulata, and Sir Henry’s killing of Twala’s only son, Scragga, consolidates their power, revealing that their interest in the plight of the marginalized stems from private interest.

The use of language to achieve a desired effect in Haggard’s romance can be traced to the political tradition of English liberal reason. Commenting upon the relationship between the eschewal of logic and the promotion of the liberal cause, Vincent Sherry writes: “There is an inveterate tendency to turn logic away from a rational management of fact and back to the consolations of philosophical principle...The tendency to escalate a rhetoric of reason in nearly inverse ratio to the credibility of the cause is the acutest susceptibility in the liberal mind.”<sup>28</sup> In spite of his dreams of imperial expansion Cecil Rhodes, “not wish[ing] to be thought too imaginative” asserts, instead, his reliance upon a “practical point of view” that privileges concrete action rather than ephemeral phrases and words. Formulating his argument against the “hasty” unification of the Cape colonies by British imperial authority, Rhodes, nevertheless, falls back upon the use of allegory in order to reiterate his political ambitions:

I remember in the impetuosity of my youth I was talking to a man advanced in years, who was planting . . . oak trees, and I said to him, very gently, that the planting of oak trees by a man advanced in years seemed to me rather imaginative. He seized the point at once and said to me, “You feel that I shall

---

<sup>26</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2007). p. 135

<sup>27</sup> In removing Twala from his throne, the trio not only stands to gain the implementation of an acceptable ruling force headed by Ignosi/Umbopa but also his indispensable help in finding King Solomon’s Mines.

<sup>28</sup> Sherry, Vincent. *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*. p. 25.

never enjoy the shade?” I said, “Yes”, and he replied, “I had the imagination, and I know what that shade will be, and at any rate no one will ever alter those lines . . . I know that I cannot expect more than to see them beyond a shrub, but with me rests the conception, the shade, and the glory.” And so, Mr. Mayor, I would submit to you the idea that in our temporary existence the results cannot be known. But we can work slowly and gradually for those results which may come beyond our temporary existence, and it is satisfactory to feel that one may find the right lines in the same way that I saw the pleasure of this individual who was laying the lines of the oak trees.”<sup>29</sup>

In this speech, Rhodes harnesses the inherent power of the impressions associated with his source of information, here “a man advanced in years.” Presenting a host of impressions related to this source—reliability, experience and ultimately credibility—Rhodes gradually consolidates the legitimacy of his claims. Conscious of his audience’s suspiciousness he adeptly feigns an air of suspicion toward his subject’s “rather imaginative” endeavor. Subsequently, he destabilizes the conventional assumption that the realization of one’s goals is hampered by the passage of an extensive period of time. Rhodes reaffirms the value of the process towards the fulfillment of his imperial schemes; the material outcome or “results,” no matter how delayed, need not overshadow expectation and ultimately the pleasurable imagination of the outcome. This compelling rhetoric of reason advances Rhodes’s effort to moderate his audience’s expectation of concrete evidence in support of his progressive and “practical” schemes in the face of an elusive victory. It also grounds Quatermain’s and his team’s imperial claims.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> See Verschoyle, F. *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches*, 1881-1900. pp. 359-360.

<sup>30</sup> See Radziwill, Catherine. *Cecil Rhodes, Man and Empire-builder*. The Polish princess Catherine Radziwill wrote of Rhodes: “Frank by nature, he was an adept at dissimulation when he thought that his personal interest required it.” See also



The private interests of Quatermain and his companions are a motivating element in their decision to help Umbopa unseat Twala and reclaim his throne. In order to divert attention from this motive, Quatermain evolves a manner of speech that plays up his averred commitment to addressing what is at stake for Umbopa. By asserting his staunch commitment to helping Umbopa and his willingness to fight for the cause, Quatermain gives himself space to realize his own ambitions. Quatermain's continuous reiteration of his unrebelling nature, not only in this particular scene, but also throughout the entire novel, establishes an evasive type of rhetoric:

I don't like revolutions. I am a man of peace, and a bit of a coward" (here Umbopa smiled), "but on the other hand, I stick to my friends, Ignosi, You have stuck to us and played the part of a man, and I will stick to you. But mind you I am a trader, and have to make my living, so I accept your offer about those diamonds in case we should ever be in a position to avail ourselves of it. Another thing: we came, as you know, to look for Incubu's (Sir Henry's) lost brother. You must help us to find him.<sup>31</sup>

The escalating frequency of this rhetoric does not actually produce, in its accumulated state, conclusive or objective evidence in support of Quatermain's "peaceful" nature, but only amounts to a performative gesture. This performative gesture opens up a space for rhetorical exceptions: "but on the other hand, I stick to my friends, Ignosi." In this space, Quatermain is free to propose another set of terms that fulfill his own personal interests. This passage, therefore, throws into relief a point of divergence between performance and rhetoric. While Ignosi's verbal promise to "stick" to

---

Sherry, Vincent. *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*. In the texts at hand, the act of dissimulation in service of personal interest is borne out through the gradual turning away from fact whose absence is often masked by rhetorical overtures to the notion of the greater good, a theme that originates from the liberally oriented train of thought set forth by L.T. Hobhouse.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

the imperial trio leads to the performance of this promise—“play[ing] the part of a man”—the performative outcome of Quatermain’s rhetorical statements, as they stand, is unclear. That is, Quatermain’s rhetorical speech and its series of propositions do not account for, in specific terms, its compromising point of origin—Quatermain’s being “mixed up in a great deal of slaughter.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, a space in which strategic interests may materialize is created through Quatermain’s indeterminate speech (in which the exact means by which Quatermain will perform his oath of loyalty is conspicuously unarticulated). Therefore, in Quatermain’s performative saying we may identify the capacity of rhetorical speech to encompass an outcome, which lies far beyond the particular moment of utterance. The implication of this rhetoric, nevertheless, is camouflaged within a pattern of statement and counter-statement that conveniently permits Quatermain to place his personal interests securely underneath a veil of a seeming adherence to moral principle. Finally, despite having voiced the terms of his agreement with Ignosi, Quatermain also downplays the centrality of his request by speaking provisionally, thereby feigning a somewhat disinterested attitude.

*King Solomon’s Mines* thus unintentionally betrays the ambiguous nature of foreign intervention in distant lands. What seems to be a mission selflessly taken on is actually directed at the realization of Quatermain’s private interests. Quatermain’s use of the language of English liberal reason allows him to frame his claims independently of moral constraints, as his violent actions become a means of preserving the well-being and survival of the group. Farah’s characters assume positions remarkably similar to Haggard’s adventurers who constantly seek to justify their actions. However, unlike Haggard’s adventurers who reinforce their Britishness, they resist any easy classification in terms of national belonging. They stand both inside and outside of the nation.

---

<sup>32</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2002). p. 10.

Farah's characters, who are eager to assert their authority and belonging in unfamiliar surroundings, fall back on the rhetoric of liberal rationalism because it provides them with a stage from which to confidently articulate their claims.

## 4.2 The Liberal Paradigm in *Links* (2003)

Nuruiddin Farah's *Links* follows Jeebleh, a Dante scholar returning home to Somalia after escaping death at the hands of the warlord, Caloosha, twenty years earlier. In Somalia, Jeebleh finds himself unable to grasp the nuances of a socially variable terrain of rules in a country divided sharply along clan lines. Equipped only with knowledge about the civil war from American newspapers, Jeebleh is unsettled by the lack of any firmly entrenched and identifiable authority. *Links*, through its representation of Jeebleh's attempts to rationalize his involvement in the crisis at hand, displays a structural affinity with the imperial novel of conquest. This affinity is a product of Jeebleh's desire to align his self-interest with the common good of the nation. Although he initially returns to Somalia in order to locate his mother's grave, Jeebleh volunteers to help recover Raasta, the niece of his friend, Bile, and her friend, Maaka. Raasta, whose birth name means hope, "was a miracle child . . . serving as a conduit for peace, enabling any two people at odds with each other to talk and make up."<sup>33</sup> Against the conflict of civil war, Raasta seems to represent the possibility of reconciliation between warring parties. Therefore, the kidnapping of Raasta and Maaka, for which the villainous Caloosha is allegedly responsible, serves as the communal backdrop for Jeebleh's private plan of attack. Jeebleh's plan to settle the score with Caloosha, whom he believes was responsible for his imprisonment, reflects his self-interest. The need to justify killing his enemy causes Jeebleh to mold a subjective and, therefore, questionable vision of what acting on behalf of the common good looks

---

<sup>33</sup> Farah, Nuruiddin. *Links*. p. 53.

like.

Jeebleh expresses a commitment to a Rawlsian ideal of liberal citizenship. Ludvig Beckman suggests that Rawls posits an idea of the moral person and the values esteemed by liberalism. In doing so, Rawls sets forth an image of the liberal citizen free to pursue his own particular conception of what constitutes the “good life” given that the state should, through minimal interference, provide a neutral framework within which the individual may realize these personal objectives.<sup>34</sup> Beckman observes that liberalism identifies the moral capacities individuals should possess: “they should be naturally inclined towards justice and they should have the desire to pursue and revise a conception of the good life.”<sup>35</sup> *Links* points up the inconsistencies that emerge within this conception of justice when it questions the extent to which individuals, of their own volition, should enact and uphold these ideals on behalf of others. It casts a skeptical eye toward the seemingly inherent and moralistic commitment of individuals to upholding the “good life,” given that such commitments and, indeed, the way social justice is defined, might directly or indirectly serve private interests. Jeebleh’s attempts to realize a moral ideal of social justice cause him to deploy the rhetorical modes of liberal reason used by Haggard’s imperial adventurers. Fiona F. Moolla writes of Jeebleh that the “transformed subject is the individual who can connect with other individuals, who breaks the bonds of isolation, who can make ‘links’ without losing the freedom essential to the autonomous self.”<sup>36</sup> Against this view of Jeebleh as the model of such self-realization, I suggest that *Links* repeatedly ironizes the modes by which Jeebleh forges connections with this social realm.<sup>37</sup>

Early on in *Links*, Jeebleh silently interrogates the moral and political underpinnings of the

---

<sup>34</sup> See Beckman, Ludvig. *The Liberal State and the Politics of Virtue*. pp. 69- 70

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> See Moolla, Fiona F. *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel & the Idea of Home*. p. 165.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 165.

pursuit of justice. On his way to a hotel located in the northern part of Mogadiscio that is controlled by the warlord StrongmanNorth, Jeebleh attempts to reconcile his own concept of justice with one purveyed by a militiaman seeking to systematically weed out an insidious network of opportunistic warlords. The militiaman, known as the Major, attempts to gauge Jeebleh's opinion on the fighting. Jeebleh, however, is wary of the gun-toting youths who belong to the Major's group and unwilling to engage him in antagonistic debate. The Major professes his willingness to kill and die in order to reclaim his clan's ancestral territory, which is controlled by the Somali warlord StrongmanSouth: "We're fighting for a worthy cause, the recovery of our territory. We're fighting against our oppressors, who're morally evil, reprehensibly blameworthy, every one of them. I see StrongmanSouth as evil for wanting to impose his wicked will on our people."<sup>38</sup> Subsuming each and every individual in the nation (one that lacks a unified and centralized form of government) under the imaginary collective of "we" the Major invokes a rhetoric of moral reasoning in line with his own strategic interest—"the recovery of *our* territory."<sup>39</sup> Here, the legitimation of violence depends on the elaboration of a wholly honorable goal where honor is inversely proportionate to the morally "reprehensible" and "blameworthy" nature of "every one of [our oppressors]".<sup>40</sup> The speaker presents a spectrum of "wicked[ness]" that extends from the general to the particular ("our oppressors," "every one of them," "StrongmanSouth") bestowing an aura of epistemological certainty and thus, legitimacy on the Major's "worthy cause."<sup>41</sup> The consolidation of this cause, however, rests entirely on the production of an all-encompassing affective response that outweighs the conspicuous absence of external facts and which is evoked through a series of highly rhetorical

---

<sup>38</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

phrases: “morally evil,” “reprehensibly blameworthy,” and “wicked will.”<sup>42</sup> Jeebleh’s thoughts serve as the objective counterpoint to the Major’s unreasoning belief: “From what Jeebleh had read, the leaders of the movement to which the Major and the driver belonged condoned the killing of innocent people who belonged to other clan families with ancestral memories different from theirs.”<sup>43</sup> According to these reports, both sides are involved in equally immoral acts. The Major’s reasons, nevertheless, illuminate the arbitrary and self-serving nature of the violence characteristic of civil war. His speech, which the text shows is distasteful to Jeebleh, is also noteworthy for its appropriation of the rationalistic discourse deployed by Haggard’s imperial adventurers.

In *Links*, rumor and “nonsensical double-talk” become the established currencies of information in an “anarchic city.”<sup>44</sup> Reason roots itself in the medium of subjective experience and verbally manifests itself through the imagination. In a dream, Jeebleh self-assuredly confirms Caloosha’s responsibility for the kidnapping of Bile’s daughter, Raasta, and Makka, an orphan that Bile takes in at his shelter, The Refuge. In his dream, Jeebleh is attempting to locate the missing girls when he hears the screams of an unidentified woman: “A woman, name unknown and face unseen, lay on a mat, screaming her head off, occasionally mumbling to herself the name of the man to whom she addressed her pleas. Jeebleh’s belief that he should confront Caloosha is largely buried in vague approximations and linguistic subtleties: “To Jeebleh, the name [of the man to whom she addressed her pleas] sounded very much like ‘Caloosha,’” and “it wasn’t clear, in the dream, whether the screaming woman had attempted suicide”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, although the presence of a nurse who

---

<sup>42</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 140 and p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 91. Fiona F. Moolla suggests that the representation of Caloosha highlights the text’s turn to a “sensationalistic” portrayal of morality. She observes that Caloosha’s “psychopathic behavior does not appear to be the consequence of a self-interest unchecked by societal control...It appears rather to be the consequence of the fact that he is innately evil” (161).

attempts to restrain her suggests that the woman is mentally ill, Jeebleh perceives her pleas as a cry for help. Similarly, despite the unknown cause of the woman's screams, Jeebleh transposes a personal story of suffering onto the wailing woman. In Jeebleh's mind, she is also a victim of Caloosha. *Links* demonstrates, therefore, that abstraction supplants the facts of an external reality: "Awake, Jeebleh saw that even with its disjointedness and lack of clarity, the dream had some highly detailed moments."<sup>46</sup> It is here that imaginative speculations take precedence, unexpectedly becoming a "concrete" basis for Jeebleh's future actions. A subjective reality is rendered factual as "highly detailed moments" shroud the "disjointedness" and "lack of clarity" characteristic of this dream sequence.<sup>47</sup> Although *Links* seems to present Jeebleh as a disinterested spectator, intent on avoiding confrontation, it also highlights the ways in which he sets in motion a series of correspondences between an external political reality and what seems to be an inherently apolitical, subjective vision.

Jeebleh uses rhetorical strategies of dissimulation in order to support his declaration that he has "come to make amends, [and] not to quarrel."<sup>48</sup> However, Jeebleh's firm rejection of violence is muted when he becomes susceptible to the belief that the achievement of his personal ambition (murdering Caloosha) is not only dependent upon the use of violence, but also legitimate because he perceives Caloosha as innately corrupt. Jeebleh's perception of Caloosha as inherently immoral bears a resemblance to Quatermain's description of Twala as evil. Like Caloosha, who presents "an ugliness [that] was so overbearing and revolting at the same time," Twala's grotesque physical features reflect his evil nature: "The gigantic figure slipped off the karros and stood up before us, a truly alarming spectacle. It was that of an enormous man with the most entirely repulsive

---

<sup>46</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 92.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

countenance we had ever beheld...it had but one gleaming black eye...and its whole expression was cruel and sensual to a degree.”<sup>49</sup> When Jeebleh compares Caloosha to the vermin that infest society, he purposefully connects an act of revenge for a personal grievance to a more altruistic goal of preserving the common good. Jeebleh’s interrogation of Caloosha reveals that the actual extent of Caloosha’s involvement in Jeebleh’s imprisonment is unclear: “‘I’m not the man you should ask.’ Caloosha paused, perspiring liberally. ‘You don’t need me to tell you that a dictator makes his decisions without advice from his subalterns. I don’t need to tell you that a tyrant’s fickle decision is law.’”<sup>50</sup> Caloosha’s reply to Jeebleh suggests that he is simply a minor player in the political landscape of Mogadiscio. Similarly, the text points up the crimes of those close to Jeebleh in order to illustrate the flawed nature of Jeebleh’s judgment.<sup>51</sup>

Jeebleh equates the use of violence with a natural struggle for political freedom. Jeebleh calls on Jefferson’s view of a democratic society grounded in the people’s responsibility to participate in struggle in order to defend their rights against tyrannous political authority. As Jeebleh says, after Thomas Jefferson: “‘A little rebellion now and then is a good thing.’ He would go even further and say, again after Mr. Jefferson: ‘The tree of liberty *must* be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is natural manure.’”<sup>52</sup> In this passage, the act of violence is framed as obligatory. On one level, what is most dangerous about these actions is their ability, in the name of justice, to reaffirm jingoistic sensibilities. In other words, the obligation to “do the job”—to implement a just society in which liberty thrives—is filtered through the perspective of seeming loyalty to a communal whole. Therefore, liberty depends on the perennial recurrence of antagonistic

---

<sup>49</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2007). p. 105

<sup>50</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 108.

<sup>51</sup> Caloosha alerts Jeebleh to the possibility that Bile has hidden his unseemly crime of robbing corpses from him.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 332.



struggle between an “us” and “them.”<sup>53</sup> In this view, violence becomes productive and almost sacrosanct. Here, the unconscionable force associated with violence is overshadowed by the end result of positive social change, in the form of justice. In order to legitimize the use of violent tactics against Caloosha, Jeebleh redirects the negative connotations of violence toward the attainment of an ethically imbued and socially beneficial end.

Although Jeebleh’s desire to realize justice lacks a concrete rationale beyond ridding society of “vermin” like Caloosha, Jeebleh views his commitment to this nebulous ideal in terms of a Rawlsian conception of natural duty.<sup>54</sup> After arriving in Mogadiscio, Jeebleh is shocked to find the city’s armed youths taking shots at random targets. When he suggests intervening, he is told to avoid taking “unnecessary risks.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, Jeebleh’s ultimate goal to kill Caloosha poses an “unnecessary risk” veiled by Jeebleh’s goal-oriented perspective and the overall sense of urgency attached to personal obligation.<sup>56</sup> As in the earlier scene in which Jeebleh is warned about the potentially lethal consequences of unsolicited intervention, he decides to take action “because somebody has to.”<sup>57</sup> Jeebleh’s deliberate construction of a plan to kill Caloosha causes him to seek out like-minded “practical” individuals like Dajaal, who is “always willing to accept risky tasks in the line of duty.”<sup>58</sup> Jeebleh’s reliance on Dajaal, whose sense of duty does not prevent him from assuming the burden of commitment to risky or potentially violent acts, highlights Jeebleh’s commitment to an individualistic brand of vigilante justice. *Links* suggests that this form of unsolicited intervention allows individuals, who may not genuinely display a commitment to preserving the welfare of those they have volunteered to assist, to wreak more havoc on the nation. This, *Links* shows, is the case

---

<sup>53</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 332.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 226.

with the American-led attack on StrongmanSouth in which the use of “confrontational styles” takes precedence over meeting the immediate needs of the population.<sup>59</sup> Here, terror-inducing acts that lack a clear reason induce wide-scale madness. Qaasir’s mother relates the story of how the careless and insensitive actions of the American Rangers put her and her child in danger: “I became hysterical...and tore at my bare breast, where my daughter had been nursing. I wailed, I wept, I cursed, I prayed, but to no avail. I tore at my clothes...convinced that my child had been swallowed up in the sand raised by the helicopter’s sudden arrival.”<sup>60</sup> The image of Qaasir’s wailing mother calls up Jeebleh’s dream of the crying woman. This parallelism indicates that the senseless acts of violence that accompany outside intervention produce degenerative and potentially irreversible effects. For instance, Jeebleh learns that the impact of the American helicopters left Dajal’s granddaughter unable to hear or speak. The pleading of the woman in Jeebleh’s dream gestures at the need to reassess the payoff of intervention and whether these acts actually stabilize the nation. After recovering Raasta and Maaka, he leaves Somalia before his friends take note of his absence. Jeebleh preserves the authority and integrity of his actions, which are resolutely non-committal: “[Jeebleh] wanted the job done, and done well—in and then out.”<sup>61</sup> Although acts of intervention may operate under the guise of securing the common good, *Links* suggests that the use of violent force encourages a superficial level of engagement with the nation that allows for an easy dissolution of personal responsibility

In *King Solomon’s Mines*, Quatermain’s rational approach, which is initially characterized by the “most careful consideration,” shifts towards speculative intuition.<sup>62</sup> The gradual erosion of Quatermain’s cautiousness is mirrored in the emergence of a more subjective mode of reasoning in

---

<sup>59</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 276.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 278.

<sup>62</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2002). p. 43.

Jeebleh, which generates a compelling basis for action. In the novels, logical disposition does not completely deteriorate, but is reoriented toward establishing a legitimate cause for realizing personal goals. *King Solomon's Mines* foregrounds the dominance of a rational turn of phrase, in which a base intention may be hidden underneath an artificial language of logic. In *King Solomon's Mines* and *Links*, a desire to achieve progress compromises the original goals of the protagonists' missions. As the novels illustrate, ensuring the success of self-interested goals requires the use of another strategy: redirecting them into a civilizing or humanitarian mission.

### 4.3 Subverting the Liberal Paradigm: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in *Links* (2003)

While *Links* adopts the structural attributes of the imperial adventure by aligning Jeebleh with the rationalistic figures of Haggard's text, it does not, however, adopt a nationalistic stance. Instead, it seeks to set forth the possibility of a more ethically attuned mode of political engagement that can, in turn, promote state rehabilitation. *Links* distances itself from the nation-centric paradigm of *King Solomon's Mines* by drawing attention to the ambiguities that attend Jeebleh's negotiation of identity in Somalia. While the nation is central to identity formation in the novel, Farah goes beyond nationalist rhetoric by entertaining the possibility of claiming multiple identities. This multifaceted view of identity allows *Links* to set itself apart from *King Solomon's Mines*, where a racially divisive conception of national identity persists throughout the text. Farah's depiction of "a dysfunctional nation," in which "smaller units" like the family do not "resonate" with an idea of national identity defined by clan belonging gestures at a diverse political and social landscape and throws into relief the monochromatic view of nation set forth by Haggard's tale of imperial conquest.<sup>63</sup> Farah works

---

<sup>63</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 229.

against a nationalism that “appeal[s] to cohesion based more on the similarity of individuals than on their concrete web of relationships” and one that also manifests itself as a paradigm that perpetuates oppositions between “us” and “them.”<sup>64</sup> In *Links*, Farah complicates the notion of nation as a unified “seamless whole” characterized by homogenous and exclusive identities.<sup>65</sup>

*King Solomon's Mines* attempts to minimize the visibility of the contradictions that permeate the national center. Specifically, the novel's portrayal of the “gentleman” Quatermain is one that alludes to an unbroken and unchallenged history of cultural and territorial integrity. Quatermain reinforces this position of uncontested superiority by constantly invoking the category of race. It is indubitably “the great Zulu Umbopa” who threatens to undermine his authority: “I asked him sharply what he meant by addressing his master in that familiar way. It is very well for natives to have a name for one among themselves, but it is not decent that they should call a white man by their heathenish appellations to his face. The Zulu laughed a quiet little laugh that angered me.”<sup>66</sup> Here, Quatermain creates a separate space for the natives who, “among themselves”, are free to use terms of disrespect. Clearly visible in this excerpt is the colonizer's anxiety about detecting a tone of familiarity (and, thus, an assumption of equality) in those who are deemed “other.” However, the novel illustrates that the very capacity of the imperial figure to maintain his position of authority demands a gradual but clear appropriation of native cultural discourse in order to advance his own imperial aims, and set him apart from the natives. This ironic gesture is conveyed through the group's imitation of the mythic-like speech of the natives they encounter (an antiquated form of the Zulu language) through the use of unidiomatic, overblown English. Although it demands recourse to an unsophisticated form of the English language, this act narcissistically reaffirms their authority:

---

<sup>64</sup> Weintraub, Jeff Alan and Krishan Kumar. *Public and private in thought and practice: perspectives on a grand dichotomy*. pp. 75-103.

<sup>65</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 34.

<sup>66</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon's Mines* (2002). p. 48.

“This magnificent address did not fail of its effect; indeed, it was hardly needed, so deeply were our friends already impressed with our powers.”<sup>67</sup> Presenting, therefore, a united imperial front, Quatermain and his fellow travelers continue to assert the autonomy of their imperial venture and its ideological premises. Their generous offer to aid Ignosi in the repossession of his title and land is actually motivated, in part, by their desire to assert the ideological underpinnings of empire. This desire is alluded to through Quatermain’s romantic projection of various idealized, albeit unrealized conceptions of imperial command onto Ignosi: he is notably impressed by Ignosi’s “self-possession” in the midst of battle and his “kingly dignity.”<sup>68</sup> The imperial trio’s interactions with the foreign nation reiterate the incorruptibility of their self-image.

Another striking instance of “othering” in the text appears in Haggard’s portrayal of Good and Foulata’s illicit love affair. Quatermain reiterates his reservations about this pairing after Foulata’s death:

I am bound to say, looking at the thing from the point of view of an oldish man of the world, that I consider her removal was a fortunate occurrence, since, otherwise, complications would have been sure to ensue. . . . no amount of beauty or refinement could have made an entanglement between Good and herself a desirable occurrence; for, as she herself put it: “Can the sun mate with the darkness, or the white with the black?”<sup>69</sup>

Even though Quatermain presents his views as traditional and normative, they may only be aptly categorized as such in terms of an imperialist world-view. “Bound” by the parameters of this imperialist world-view, Quatermain’s opinion is almost programmatic in nature. A “fortunate

---

<sup>67</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon’s Mines* (2002). p. 87.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 224 and p. 228.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

occurrence,” for Quatermain, Foulata’s “removal” facilitates a return to the desirable status quo of the past and natural order of things. Once again, in this passage, Quatermain appropriates the metaphorical speech of the natives to suit his own purposes. A pattern of static absolutes fixed in opposing binaries emerges: “sun” is juxtaposed with “darkness”, and “white” contrasts with “black”. This pattern reflects the divisive terms of national identity that the overarching imperialistic structure of the novel reinforces. *Links*, however, works to problematize an exclusivist politics of national belonging.

### 4.3.1. Nationalism

In *Links*, no single national identity assumes pride of place. Farah conveys Jeebleh’s ability to occupy multiple spheres of belonging within the nation, thereby pointing to the possibility of shifting constantly between positions of inclusion and exclusion within the nation’s political, cultural and social spaces. Although the Major accuses Jeebleh of having supplanted his Somali identity with an American one, Jeebleh looks critically at this single given identity: “You see, we Somalis who live in America, we keep asking one another where we stand on the matter of our acquired new American identity.”<sup>70</sup> Here, Jeebleh’s use of the pronoun “we” emphasizes his own sense of inclusion in the Somali nation while simultaneously referring to his position within another national reality. Choosing not to privilege one national affiliation over the other, Jeebleh maintains an indeterminate stance, not only to indicate his hesitation about fully embracing his newfound American identity, but also to point to his liminal position between his American and Somali identity. This, in turn, allows him to examine critically the conflict at hand from multiple angles. For instance, while Jeebleh empathizes with Bile’s account of the American rangers, whom he claims “lost their focus,” and, in doing so, wrought needless havoc during what appeared to be a

---

<sup>70</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 36.

humanitarian aid effort, he also urges his friends to avoid transposing the mistakes of a single high-ranking American military official onto each of its citizens: “Can all of America be held responsible for the gaffes made by one of its nationals?”<sup>71</sup> When Jeebleh concedes that any attachment he has to America arises from his family’s residence there, he suggests that his relationship to America is not necessarily ideological but merely the result of affective ties.

Farah exposes the contradictions that define the Somali nation by highlighting the way in which seemingly discrete identities may overlap in an arbitrary fashion with one another, causing interaction to occur between politically estranged groups within the nation. Given that clan identity is patrilineal, individuals from different families may still, in the case of Caloosha and Jeebleh, share a common male ancestor. Moreover, clan identity outweighs the strength of affective solidarities, linking together individuals who may be at odds with one another: “Jeebleh, Bile’s closest friend, was deemed to be related, in blood terms, more to Caloosha, because the two were descended from the same mythic ancestor.”<sup>72</sup> As the Major reminds Jeebleh, it is better to depend on those who share the same ancestral bloodlines: “Here we don’t think of ‘friends’ anymore. We rely on our clansmen, on those sharing our ancestral blood.”<sup>73</sup> This sense of dependency comes to the fore when Jeebleh’s clansmen seek out Jeebleh in order to remind him of his duty to strengthening the clan’s militia. Loyalty to one’s clan, Jeebleh observes, is of a nature so absolute that it has the power to divide those within a single group fighting for the same cause, even those who have grown up together in intimate contact. Jeebleh notices a distinct change in the behavior of the Major and his men, for although they “showed a united front,” they were loyal to different sets of bloodlines and thus

---

<sup>71</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 261, p. 263.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

“friends and cousins one instant, sworn foes the next.”<sup>74</sup> This variable and fragile framework of alliances causes Jeebleh to anxiously ponder “how to define himself [in Somalia].”<sup>75</sup> When Jeebleh arrives at his hotel, Ali, the hotel manager, welcomes him. Ali refers to himself and Jeebleh as members of a larger collectivity: “We are sons of the land, to which we belong, you and I.”<sup>76</sup> However, this display of inclusivity strikes Jeebleh as a potential liability given that Ali, were he a clansmen of his who committed an act of violence, could implicate Jeebleh in the crime through the mere invocation of a shared ancestral history:

Jeebleh revisited his earlier exchanges with the Major [...]. It had been one thing talking to the Major, who thought of him as an outsider; it was altogether another to be in the company of the manager, with his inclusive “we”! What was he to do? Spurn Ali, who wished to relate to him, or welcome the inclusion, and yet keep a discreet distance, for his life might in the end depend on it?<sup>77</sup>

This passage underlines Jeebleh’s agency as it demonstrates his capacity to determine “whom he would associate himself with” through the strategic invocation of “pronomial affiliations.”<sup>78</sup> These strategic decisions result from Jeebleh’s recognition that his actions are not neutral. Instead, they are always seen through the lens of civil war conflict: “In these unsettling times, everyone’s fate, actions, dreams, hates, and aspirations were seen, understood, and interpreted in stark political contexts.”<sup>79</sup> Although Jeebleh would like to distance himself from his clan family, Ali’s earlier indication that he and Jeebleh are “sons of the land” indicates that they in one conception belong to the same set of

---

<sup>74</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 34.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.



“blood” lines.<sup>80</sup> Farah reiterates the inevitability of Jeebleh’s being caught within the space of “overlapping worlds,” and thus Jeebleh’s acknowledgement of this predicament inclines him to adopt the linguistic logic of the passage above—one that affords him the possibility of demarcating the line between “we” and “them” as he pleases.<sup>81</sup> For instance, while Jeebleh condemns the opportunistic behavior of his clansmen, he nonetheless knows that he may obtain a certain sense of security in terms of self-preservation from “relating” to Ali. Therefore, Jeebleh’s strategic avowal and disavowal of his clan identity throughout the novel reiterates his continuous traversal of the line that separates self and other.

Through Jeebleh, Farah presents national identity as anything but monolithic. It is not solely a function of Jeebleh’s citizenship or loyalty to his clan family, and may be based upon a combination of these elements, located within and beyond the nation. *Links* forces the reader to look beyond the nation as the all-encompassing determinant of contemporary identity, shifting readerly focus from the nation to the individual and his or her particular history. Ultimately, while *King Solomon’s Mines* articulates a notion of national identity that depends entirely on continuously reinforcing the boundary between self and other, Farah suggests the possibility of locating a middle-ground between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

---

<sup>80</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. p. 40. In the following passage Jeebleh undercuts the “privileged status” of “blood” ties: “Jeebleh lapsed into a private mood, a man in his own space. He did his utmost not to display unease at the thought of privileging blood over ideology. The idea of nine self-appointed clansmen making a claim on him was anathema” (127).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 155.

### 4.3.2 Cosmopolitanism

Although Farah presents cosmopolitanism as a viable alternative to forms of nationalism, he examines the challenges that beset its real-world application. By doing so, Farah acknowledges, without denying the all-inclusive ambitions of cosmopolitanism, the continuing viability and necessity of the state as an ethical counterpoint to a diffuse and unmoored global identity. In *Links*, cosmopolitanism echoes the definition put forth by Anthony Appiah, who suggests the existence of two types of gestures that make up cosmopolitanism: “we have obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind . . . or shared citizenship” and “that we take seriously the value . . . of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.”<sup>82</sup> This definition adds an ethical dimension to cosmopolitanism as it stresses the inherent responsibility of each human being to all others over individual loyalty to a particular locality. In *Links*, one of the issues that Farah raises with regards to cosmopolitanism is that the limits of “kith and kind” are not so easily dismantled in favor of implementing the ideal of a universal brotherhood. Farah’s critique of cosmopolitanism sets his novel apart from the imperial adventure novel by imagining what a socially responsible and ethically attuned global identity would look like. In *Links* he juxtaposes two forms of cosmopolitanism, upheld by Jeebleh and Seamus. This set of contrasts allows Farah to pose the question of where the responsibility of the global citizen, with respect to other nations, begins and ends. Therefore, although Farah may be seen to advocate a transnational view of identity, he is quite aware of the difficulty of responding universally to the needs of all mankind while maintaining a respect for and an awareness of cultural difference.

A scene in which Jeebleh encounters a man suffering from an epileptic fit in a passive crowd, and is “forced to intervene,” represents Appiah’s view of cosmopolitanism as a vehicle for

---

<sup>82</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006). p. xv.

voluntarily coming to the aid of others who may not share one's social, cultural, or political values or background.<sup>83</sup> The conflict between the cosmopolitan's desire to effect universal concern for each and every individual beyond family and nation and to respect cultural difference is played out in this scene through an alternating rhetoric of commonality and difference. In this scene, Jeebleh's status as "stranger" is temporarily lifted as "the men ma[ke] space for him."<sup>84</sup> This expansion of a local space to give admission to Jeebleh seems to foreshadow a resolution of the conflict at hand; however, the crowd suddenly rescinds its welcoming gesture, viewing Jeebleh as a potential burden: "Do we know who *he* is? Is it a matter of time before he falls sick and drops forehead first into a heap of nervous disorder?"<sup>85</sup> Here, the words of a member of the crowd, GapTooth, draw the reader's attention to the fact that Jeebleh has not identified himself to the crowd. At the same time, however, GapTooth refuses to make himself known to Jeebleh, claiming the safety of anonymity: "Alas, I have no name by which I wish to be known in these terrible times...nor do I answer to my old name, because of the associations it has for me nowadays."<sup>86</sup> The scene, therefore, requires that Jeebleh and GapTooth interact outside of the politically divisive context of the civil war. The crowd, nevertheless, insists on clarifying the nature of their relationship to Jeebleh. Jeebleh and the epileptic man are equally distanced from them. Yet, their inability to account for "Jeebleh's presence among them," causes them to make a distinction between their relationship to Jeebleh and their relationship to the epileptic lying on the ground before them: "I would say that the man lying unconscious on the ground, whom we are shunning, has more things in common with us than this newly arrived stranger...It is this man we should be worried about!"<sup>87</sup> The distinction made by GapTooth, the

---

<sup>83</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006). p. xv.

<sup>84</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 196.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 197.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* p. 198.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 197.

voice of the crowd, points to the existence of a hierarchy of relationships: a system based on varying degrees of familiarity. While Jeebleh attempts to uphold the cosmopolitan principle of coming to the aid of someone who is altogether “unfamiliar,” the crowd eschews this principle on the basis of preserving loyalty towards their clan family. In reference to the unconscious man, another member of the crowd boldly asserts: “We do not bother with people we do not know!”<sup>88</sup> Through the unwillingness of the crowd to help a fellow Somali without knowing the name of his clan family, Farah gestures toward the inescapability of clan-based politics that prevent coming to the rescue of those dissimilar to oneself.

Farah contrasts Jeebleh’s application of cosmopolitanism with the mode of cosmopolitanism set in motion by the Irish aid worker Seamus. When Jeebleh asks Seamus why he has chosen to come to Somalia, he acknowledges that he has come to help in order to escape a personal history of conflict in Ireland. Seamus’s assertion of his long-term commitment to Somalia, however, compensates for his admission that the motivations for his engagement are intensely personal: “I am here to stay, that’s what matters.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Seamus clearly identifies his cause as Africa, while Jeebleh, having abandoned his plan of locating his mother’s grave, hesitates in qualifying the nature of his own involvement in Somalia.<sup>90</sup> Jeebleh’s declaration to Seamus that he has “responsibilities elsewhere, a loving family to love” throws into relief Seamus’s steadfast dedication to Africa, a dedication not subservient to national loyalty, the clan family, or romantic love, but solely: “a good, plain, old-fashioned, sixties-style personal commitment to love.”<sup>91</sup> In this way, Farah contrasts Seamus’s clearheaded and steadfast involvement in Africa with Jeebleh’s non-committal and indeterminate stance toward the nation-state.

---

<sup>88</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 199.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

While Seamus's commitment to doing good in Somalia may be somewhat Eurocentric, Seamus is, nevertheless, the character in *Links* who comes closest to embodying Appiah's view of cosmopolitanism as a universal mode of existence that seeks to preserve the diverse and incongruous aspects of human existence, motivated by a selfless desire to effect positive change. While Jeebleh views Somalia as a "fragmented land" that could not possibly afford the opportunity for self-regeneration, Seamus feels that he has "run into himself" in Mogadiscio.<sup>92</sup> Seamus brings his cosmopolitan views to the fore when he claims: "the idea of owing allegiance to a country is foreign to me."<sup>93</sup> Unlike Jeebleh, who maintains and privileges his relationship with the United States through his family (ties further stressed by his unwillingness to part with his American passport while passing through an immigration counter in Somalia and his eventual return home), Seamus wholeheartedly immerses himself in his "cause," Africa.<sup>94</sup> While Jeebleh cannot see past the corruption of his clan members and his desire to confront Caloosha, Seamus expresses genuine concern for "those caught up in the fighting, and those who cannot help losing themselves in the politics."<sup>95</sup> This concern is ultimately productive as Seamus devotes his time and efforts to aid work at Bile's shelter. Furthermore, Seamus's ability to remain detached from the intricate web of political conflict that overwhelms Jeebleh affirms his undeterred commitment to establishing a reciprocal "friendship" between individuals and countries and restoring peace in Somalia.

Seamus echoes Appiah's belief that cosmopolitanism may act as a vehicle for promoting peace and global stability: his "all-inclusive Irish loyalty" coincides with Appiah's argument that peace should not come at the price of abandoning one's national pride.<sup>96</sup> Seamus's acknowledgement

---

<sup>92</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 37, p. 190.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

that he has concealed a “major absence” in his life and “built happiness” by working to eradicate “someone else’s sorrow” demonstrates an awareness of the tangible connections he has forged between his personal life and the larger public realm.<sup>97</sup> Jeebleh, on the other hand, is wary of admitting that he has also done the same, distancing himself from Seamus who has declared his reasons for staying in Somalia: Jeebleh “wished he could say the same about himself. But then, he hadn’t come to sweep clean the corners of his life that had grown dustier from neglect.”<sup>98</sup> Jeebleh’s quick dismissal suggests that Seamus’s declaration of intent stems from his sentimental need to justify his espousal of Somalia as a cause. Nevertheless, Farah seems to suggest that an open acknowledgment of self-interest is of the utmost necessity in a world that allows, through advances in education, technology and transportation, a proliferation of links between individuals and places. Amidst this network of proliferating links, it becomes increasingly difficult to weigh the significance of one cause against another and to establish the ethical parameters of the action enabled by these links.

---

<sup>97</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. pp. 189-190.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

## 4.4 Who Pulls the Strings? The State and Individual Subjecthood in *Knots* (2007)

While *Links* suggests that the sociopolitical engagement of diasporic citizens can take place on an ethically attuned plane, *Knots* begins to unsettle this possibility at the same time that it highlights the transformative potential of the global actor who works in concert with other individuals in the nation. *Knots* follows Cambara, a Somali woman who defiantly leaves Toronto for Mogadiscio to repossess the family home of her childhood from a minor warlord. In the process she makes a definitive leap (both literal and figurative) from would-be actress and playwright to theater director in a city where the National Theatre has fallen into the hands of opportunistic militiamen. While working toward reclaiming the family property, she also decides to put on a “play for peace.”<sup>99</sup> A recent divorcee, the victim of domestic abuse, and a mother grieving the death of her son, Cambara, like Seamus in *Links*, aims to make Somalia her cause. She uses Somalia as the staging ground for the repeated consolidation of her lost agency and, therefore, the text questions whether Cambara serves the nation or whether it is serving her. Although Cambara wants to assist in the development of Somalia, she idealistically conceives of development as a straightforward and independently run endeavor that must culminate in success. In *Knots*, Cambara’s plans to develop the nation are guided by the principles of feminism and a progressive ideology that center on the expectation that the individuals comprising the nation will conform to certain standards of development consistent with a privileged, middle-class identity. Cambara’s commitment to Somalia is more enduring than Jeebleh’s. However, *Knots* debates the legitimacy of a commitment that fails to take stock of the limitations that circumscribe the lived reality of the nation-state.

---

<sup>99</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 215.

*Knots* suggests that development requires more than material gifts or freedom. It shows that development involves a sustained process of social reciprocity between individuals of disparate backgrounds. *Knots* highlights Cambara's superficial conception of development through her relationship with Zaak, a poor Somali cousin. *Knots* presents Zaak as a charity-case who requires assistance to meet his full potential. Cambara's mother, Arda, "brought him from a nomadic hamlet during his early teens as her charge in order to facilitate his receiving proper schooling in Mogadiscio."<sup>100</sup> At Arda's request, Cambara helps Zaak procure a Canadian visa by posing as his wife. Although Zaak secures his visa, the text highlights the superficiality of Zaak's acknowledgment as a "real" individual. For Zaak, recognition resides not only in becoming a legal resident before the law but also the private acknowledgment of his humanity and emotional needs: "This is your world, and I am made to feel privileged to live in it the way a poor relative lives in the house belonging to his well-to-do kin."<sup>101</sup> Here, charity augments difference instead of cultivating social reciprocity. Zaak's animosity at having "been a guest all [his] life," suggests that Zaak's treatment is incommensurable with his actual needs. He is never truly seen as a social equal.<sup>102</sup> Cambara reconciles and diffuses this contradiction (the bestowal of material privileges and comforts upon another individual are not necessarily synonymous with recognizing the essential humanity and worth of that individual) when she explains Zaak's anger at his mistreatment in terms of Zaak's sexual frustrations: "he might behave like a man with a mind to beat her up because he couldn't have his way with her."<sup>103</sup> Here, Cambara does not explain Zaak's indignation in terms of his repeated subjection to a process of insubstantial socialization. He is, instead, figured as morally degenerate and immature: he is unable to cope with the demands of "be[ing] his own man" or

---

<sup>100</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33.



“liv[ing] his own life.”<sup>104</sup> Similarly, he is perceived in dehumanizing terms, as a “baboon fingering the mess of a just-peeled rotten banana and lavishly gorging on everything in sight.”<sup>105</sup> Zaak is, therefore, repeatedly figured as inherently unable to assume the responsibilities of a fully socialized individual. Instead of acknowledging her unfulfilled responsibility to Zaak, Cambara attributes a narrative of personal defect to him. Cambara’s dismissiveness toward Zaak (she fails to comply with the terms of their fake marriage) and her unwillingness to give him the benefit of the doubt demonstrates her adherence to an unrealistic and harmful standard of development.

In *Knots*, Cambara views the needs of the nation through the lens of a liberal, Western feminism. Encouraged to purchase the fresh produce of a local market woman, Cambara is bewildered that the woman “worked out that [she] [was] from elsewhere—a dollar country.”<sup>106</sup> *Knots*, therefore, indicates Cambara’s recognition of the visibility of her foreign identity and, hence, awareness of her class privilege. Cambara looks desperately for money to give the woman, who becomes increasingly exasperated at Cambara’s insistence that she has none. Cambara’s inability to fill the role that accompanies the woman’s identification of Cambara as a desirable foreign customer is countered by Cambara’s suggestion of an underlying connectedness between herself and the women around her: “[S]he [was] among women. She enjoy[ed] seeing so many women trading in local produce and wearing colorful *guntiino* robes, the traditional attire, and the fact that they [were] dominating an entire section of the marketplace.”<sup>107</sup> Cambara’s pleasure in viewing this display downplays her failure to meet the very immediate economic needs of the women and replaces it with an idealist strain that revolves around the freedom of women and the solidarity between them.

Forging an outward semblance of belonging, Cambara’s decision to don the veil associated

---

<sup>104</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 33.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

with Somali tradition is part of a process of self-fashioning that holds up, through the veil's suggestion of a "brand new selfhood," a notion of the individual actor free of all restraints.<sup>108</sup> Although Cambara initially finds the veil "bothersome," this "impediment" becomes part of a larger performance of Cambara's female autonomy in Somalia.<sup>109</sup> The veil seems to consolidate Cambara's agency as it allows her to "camouflage" her identity and, in doing so, gain the trust of those around her.<sup>110</sup> The veil's "theatrical" qualities also provide Cambara with access to a restricted social space while preserving the integrity of a physical self concealed from public view.<sup>111</sup> When Cambara arrives at Hotel Shamac, her "veiled persona" mimics the pose of a woman able to "forge bewitchments that will make [the armed guards] do her bidding."<sup>112</sup> Even though the armed guards do not search Cambara's person, Cambara's defiance extends to the complete removal of her face veil. Once again, Cambara, in the manner of reading Zaaq's intentions towards her as alternately of a violent and sexual nature, suspects that the guards perceive her as if she were "behaving like a stripper doing it on the cheap."<sup>113</sup> Cambara's thoughts reveal that she conflates her disrespect for the customs of the nation with a self-righteous expression of female autonomy. In doing so, she continues to transpose a liberal feminism onto her surroundings. Cambara's identification of her social position as one that coincides with that of the marginalized female figure extends to her dealings with Jiijo, the wife of the warlord Gudcur, as Cambara extends the narrative of patriarchal victimhood to her in order to justify her own intentions (reclaiming the family home). When Jiijo (who lives in Cambara's childhood home) refers to the "animal-[like]" nature of the house's male inhabitants, the text recalls Cambara's own disgust at Zaaq's slovenliness and his squalid living conditions. Although Jiijo views

---

<sup>108</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 107.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p. 108, p. 149.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 108.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 110.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p. 140.

her hardships in relationship to the nation's struggles asking, "[w]hat help is there for our doomed nation?" Cambara redirects Jijjo's story by asking a series of questions meant to evoke the two women's abuse at the hands of patriarchal aggressors: a "communality of male violence."<sup>114</sup> In a move that calls up her history of violence with her ex-husband, Wardi, Cambara requests that Jijjo describe her marriage to a cousin, chosen by family members in order to preserve a semblance of family honor.<sup>115</sup> In highlighting the way in which Cambara's just concern for the unwarranted denial of individual rights is conflated with a view of those abuses as systematic and pervasive, *Knots* gestures toward the privileged status of Cambara's individuality and its embeddedness in a unsavory culture of feminist legitimation.

Cambara conceives of development through the implementation of an orderly reality that is inconsistent with actual circumstances. Cambara's misguided perception of what constitutes "order" manifests itself through the maternal guidance she offers the young armed men she encounters in Somalia. Lending assistance to the youths and catering to their needs, Cambara successfully pursues her larger goal of instilling order within the nation. Her civilization of the rowdy youths is equated, in the novel, with the reeducation of the nation and redirection of its developmental trajectory. In contrast to the permanent disorder of the nation (like Zaaq's grotesque physical state) Cambara's involvement with the Somali youths reflects the ease with which such developmental ideals might be implemented. Initially, disorder appears with Cambara's initial foray into the area where her family property is located. When a gun is misfired in the vehicle transporting Cambara and Zaaq's crew, Cambara comes to the rescue of the youth, SilkHair, who "foul[s] himself out of fright."<sup>116</sup> Cambara singles out the unfortunate SilkHair, who is taunted by his peers, as the object of a plan that seeks to

---

<sup>114</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 175.

<sup>115</sup> Kerry Bystrom writes that Zaaq "can be read to incarnate the patriarchal aspects of Somali society that Farah has critiqued consistently beginning with his novel *From a Crooked Rib* (1970)" (417).

<sup>116</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 91.

reform the individual according to an ideal that is not grounded in immediate reality. In the novel, Cambara's son, Dalmar, a child of the Somali diaspora, serves as a model for reform: "Dalmar's clothes will fit SilkHair nicely. What's more, she will take care of him, disarm him, school him, and turn him into a fine boy, peace-loving, caring."<sup>117</sup> In this formulation of her plan, Cambara unknowingly rearticulates the logic that characterized Zaaq's upbringing and allowed Arda to exert an unending sense of control. Like Arda who continues to manipulate Zaaq from a distance, Cambara will treat her young apprentice "[a]s if [he] [was] of her own flesh and blood" perpetuating, perhaps, a cycle of dependency and manipulation.<sup>118</sup> Mirroring her fixation with Zaaq's unruly body, Cambara bestows a great deal of attention on SilkHair's appearance, "gingerly smooth[ing] the gorgy silkiness of his unkempt hair with studied effeteness," pondering "what has become of the boy's missing upper tooth," and planning to "pay the dentist's bill to have it fixed."<sup>119</sup> SilkHair's potential as a transformable subject lies in the ease with which he, once decked out in Dalmar's clothes, appears to assume a newfound maturity and "grown-up" appearance.<sup>120</sup> In attending to the reformation of armed youths, Cambara focuses her attentions, single-mindedly, on cleaning up visible manifestations of disorder. In the same way that she helps Jiijo, Cambara instructs the male members of Zaaq's crew in how to clean the surfaces of Zaaq's ruinous house. Like "a headmistress at a convent school who is disciplining her charges," Cambara confiscates the men's *qaat* and fosters their compliance through her efforts to enact, through performance, an ideological sea change in their understanding of masculinity.<sup>121</sup>

To while away the time pleasantly as they work she puts on the CD player, and out

---

<sup>117</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 92.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p. 93.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

comes blaring some Somali music, actually a song of her own composition, the CD cut privately in a back alley studio in Toronto....Thinking ‘Not too bad though,’ she lets them hear it several times. In the song, a boy—the voice is that of Dalmar—says, ‘When is a man a man?’ A woman’s voice, Cambara’s, replies, ‘A man is a man when he can work like a man, hardy, dedicated, mindful that he uses his strength to serve the good of the community.’”<sup>122</sup>

What comes to the fore here is the self as an unambiguous reference point for the fate of the common good. Although Farah indicates that the youths serve the community by providing needed security, Cambara insists on aligning them with her feminist expectations: men must also perform a woman’s chores. Through the text’s reference to Cambara’s self-starter artistic process (a creative indulgence that she believes will one day result in a CD release) it alludes to the insularity of Cambara’s social perspective. The call and response form of the song itself evokes a doctrinal tone and reflects Cambara’s naïve belief that she can instill conformity through repetition as “she lets them hear [the song] several times.”<sup>123</sup> Setting out to complete the domestic task of slaughtering a chicken for the group’s evening meal, SilkHair exasperatedly chases after the escaped bird until LongEars shoots the chicken. While Cambara views SilkHair’s actions as a test of his patience and determination, LongEars’ casual shooting of the chicken reasserts the disparity of Cambara and the group’s goals—the one striving to instill an idealistic program of self-betterment and personal growth, the other intent on survival in the present and locating immediate solutions, though violent, to impoverished circumstances.

Through Cambara’s disparate views of the two preadolescent boys—SilkHair and Gacal—*Knots* emphasizes Cambara’s repeated conflation of class with personality and individual potential.

---

<sup>122</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 98.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

*Knots* questions whether Cambara's commitment to managing SilkHair's welfare can withstand her new fascination with Gacal whom, she is told, "is no one's son."<sup>124</sup> Juxtaposing Cambara with Seamus who "has adopted the entire country and survived it," *Knots* casts SilkHair and Gacal as Cambara's adoptees.<sup>125</sup> However, as the text demonstrates, Cambara, who initially viewed SilkHair as the spitting image of her son, becomes enamored of another Dalmar look-alike, Gacal, who despite his possession of "flair" associated with the "well-born" lacks, much to Cambara's surprise, a discernible family lineage.<sup>126</sup> Although Cambara acknowledges that Gacal, like Wardi, may be taking advantage of her naiveté and generosity she chooses to take responsibility for Gacal's care.<sup>127</sup> Through the doubling of SilkHair and Gacal, *Knots* casts a backward glance at Cambara's relationship to Zaak and Wardi, objects of Cambara's attention since fallen into neglect. Cambara idealizes Gacal as a "mythical persona" who, lacking true family ties and "born . . . through a finger, undefiled," becomes an embodiment of individual perfection untouched by national strife.<sup>128</sup> Unlike SilkHair, who appears disheveled and displays unease with his own body, Gacal "carries himself with élan" despite the "tragedy" of being "unmoored" from his middle-class roots.<sup>129</sup> In *Knots*, Cambara plans to stage a play in which Gacal and SilkHair take on acting roles. Cambara's play becomes the stage from which she "foster[s] [Gacal] to high ambitions," casting him in the role of the eagle.<sup>130</sup> In fact, Cambara's casting of Gacal in the role of the eagle and SilkHair's displeasure at his relegation to the role of the chicken suggests an underlying favoritism. Cambara allows Gacal certain freedoms that

---

<sup>124</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 228.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p. 218.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p. 229.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p. 230. Through his relationship with Cambara, Wardi gains Canadian residency. She also pays retraining fees so that he can gain employment.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p. 229.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p. 229.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p. 258, p. 245.

prevent her from adequately assessing his true character.<sup>131</sup> Although Cambara has her suspicions that Gacal is inclined to misbehave in the company of two young girls, she “prays he will leave it at that and not lust after her nor permit his sexual urges—not that there is any evidence of such so far—to exercise total control over his rapport with Sumaya or her younger sister.”<sup>132</sup> Yet, even though Cambara aligns Gacal with Pinocchio, a “Good Bad Boy” “primarily because he strikes her as having had a middle-class background,” the text disrupts this view when it points up Gacal’s delight at having watched and “enjoy[ed],” behind Cambara’s back, a blue film.<sup>133</sup> When SilkHair vies with Gacal for the role of the eagle (not wanting to play the role of lowly, ill-bred chicken), Cambara believes she has resolved the situation by making the two boys prepare a meal together. Once, again, the naïveté of Cambara’s vision of equality and fair treatment is revealed through the fact that Gacal never surrenders or exchanges his role and only performs his chores for a brief period of time. On the other hand, SilkHair who Cambara “reckons . . . is not much of a reader” remains bound to his domestic chores.<sup>134</sup> To this extent, SilkHair, in Cambara’s mind, seems to lack the malleability and desire for growth that she naively attributes to Gacal. Indeed, although she stumbles across Gacal asleep, resting his head on a stack of books, she is “[d]elighted to presume that he has been leafing through the text on which she is planning to base her play.”<sup>135</sup> Despite the text’s allusions to Gacal’s manipulative streak (à la Wardi), Cambara idealizes him as the consummate theatrical performer. Gacal’s casting as eagle also highlights Cambara’s underlying commitment to an insular and unchanging vision of middle-class identity since the play foregrounds how class breeding and family lineage, despite situational difficulties, ultimately shines through.

---

<sup>131</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 232.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p. 237.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 240 and p. 290.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p. 287.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p. 272.

*Knots* indicates that progress can be realized through the cooperation of various collectivities, but this proposition is undermined by Cambara's insistence on acting unilaterally. Cambara's evocation of female solidarity, grounded in a history of male violence, seems to bring forth agency free of patriarchal restraints. Nevertheless, this agency is wedded to a lofty and detached feminism that sees an atomization of the text's social actors at odds with what the text suggests, through its depiction of the Women's Network, should amount to the operation of feminism within the space of collectivities. The Women's Network, an NGO funded by the European Union, foregrounds the coming-together of a vast number of Somali women who work to combat the gun violence that leads to the abuse of women. *Knots* advances the idea that such peaceful networks serve to mitigate the effects of the violent acts carried out by warring male parties who escalate conflict because they "prefer starting wars to talking things over."<sup>136</sup> *Knots*, ironically, alludes to the lack of communication that defines Cambara's paternalistic actions. Cambara, determined to oust Gudcur from her family home, refuses to share the details of her plan with Kiin, the leader of the Network, who invites her to join their ranks. Although Kiin is willing to provide help (she supplies a plumber, driver and security guards) without any knowledge of Cambara's intent, Cambara's realization that she may put them in danger does not result in greater communication: "[She] decides that it is best that she give Kiin a version of the events very close in general outline to the truth. . . . and, if need be, stretch the mode of telling it the way she knows best."<sup>137</sup> Moreover, although Kiin and Cambara's friend Raxma both urge her to seek the help of people with better connections in locating Gacal's mother, Cambara insists on shouldering the entire task. In relating the efforts he and Bile made to reduce gun violence by establishing The Refuge, Seamus reflects on the limitations of such humanitarian efforts. In speaking of The Refuge, Seamus links Jeebleh and other members of Somalia's political

---

<sup>136</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 194.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* p. 207.



class to the growing inutility of such collective efforts:

You would have appreciated it if you had come in [The Refuge's] heyday or even just before the idea of its irrelevance began to become clear, soon after Jeebleh's visit... You see, it was a couple of years after he set up The Refuge that Bile and I linked up and, together, made things work and pretty well... We did what we could then to assist in providing a rationale to disarm the militias... But there was—there is—need for more universal commitments; no do-gooders can do as much as it will take to reconstruct the country's infrastructure, reorient the people of this nation so they might find their proper bearing and help them to reestablish the state on a viable footing.<sup>138</sup>

This stance provides for a wider network of individuals working together toward social reconstruction and the capacity to address multiple problems. Even The Refuge, on its own, is unable to advance social progress and, therefore, efforts must be coordinated among a wider network of individuals. Here, the idealistic tendencies of an elite few derail reconstructive efforts. Cambara's motherly concern for Bile who, mentally and physically ill, regresses to a child-like state reflects this idealistic strain: "The smell takes her back to a memory in her distant past, and which she thinks of no reason to relive: a baby making a terrible mess, soiling its clothes with its own waste, and she, the mother of the child, cleaning it all up."<sup>139</sup> Bile's helplessness and "bodily aberrations" mirror Zaak's own child-like inadequacies.<sup>140</sup> However, Bile's willingness to comply with Cambara (facilitating her repossession of the family house by "prodding Dajaal into action, without her ever soliciting his intervention") foreshadows a harmonious marital union in which

---

<sup>138</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 329.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 313.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* p. 320.

Cambara can effortlessly maintain the upper hand.<sup>141</sup> Even though Cambara concedes that Bile's rehabilitation is best left to "those who have been close to him much longer," she takes on his problems because she feels most equipped to deal with them: "She hopes to deal with his and her problems with the subtlety of a highly professional puppeteer controlling her marionettes with the help of invisible wires."<sup>142</sup> *Knots* suggests, however, that Cambara must relinquish some of this control in order for her actions to be effective.

In *Knots*, Farah links Cambara's insistence on carrying out humanitarian efforts independently, without the input or knowledge of other social actors, to personal delusions and madness. The opening night of Cambara's play, held under the auspices of the Women's Network, represents the culminating point of this psychological decline and confirms Zaak's observation that Cambara "live[s] in a world of [her] own manufacture."<sup>143</sup> During the play, Cambara is unable to identify the people in the audience and lacks a sense of her relationship to her surroundings: "She has no idea who or where she is anymore, what she is supposed to do where, and when she looks at the faces of the women and men...she finds she cannot name any of them."<sup>144</sup> While this confusion is, perhaps, the product of Cambara's anxiety about the play, it also calls up an earlier scene in which she loses her way in an unlit basement after leaving Bile's apartment. At this juncture she must decide how to proceed: continue devising ways to institute her invented reality, or address reality as it appears? For example, Cambara observes that she is inclined to care for Bile because she is "investing in him" as a part of her imagined life in Somalia.<sup>145</sup> Bile performs a role in what Cambara imagines: "She envisages living in the house—she has no idea for how long—and working in the

---

<sup>141</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 322.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. p. 326 and p. 319.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. p. 417.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. p. 335.

service of peace and justice as the situation permits. Cambara pictures spending quality time with Bile, who, in her imagining, is enamored not so much of her as he is of the idea of a woman like her.”<sup>146</sup> Cambara’s desire to adhere to the outlines of this “idea” suggests that she is simply performing a role with no basis in reality. During the play, Cambara’s off-kilter engagement with Somalia comes to the fore, once again, with the reappearance of Maimouna, the female lawyer who assists Cambara in filing Wardi’s immigration papers. Cambara who has not foreseen Maimouna’s attendance at her play is unable to pinpoint the purpose of her visit to Somalia. Although the text does not provide any indication of Maimouna’s motives, Cambara immediately links Maimouna’s presence to her desire to help recover Gacal’s lost entry documents to the United States, and to represent his mother, Qaali. Maimouna, too, therefore, is subjected to Cambara’s construction of a reality suited to the realization of her charitable plans. She infers that Maimouna’s intent mirrors her own given that she sits next to members of the Women’s Network, Kiin and Farxia: “[Cambara’s] is the joy of an animal reuniting with its own kindred.”<sup>147</sup> Cambara’s eagerness to confirm that Maimouna fits in with this imagined reality prompts her to make her way towards Maimouna in the middle of the performance: “She takes the first few strides with incredible agility and speed . . . Kiin, in the meanwhile, is almost on top of her, holding her back, whispering to her that she is disturbing the audience.”<sup>148</sup> Ignoring Kiin, Cambara continues to single-mindedly pursue her goal without consideration for those around her: “It is obvious to [members of the audience] that she is disturbing their enjoyment, creating a racket and moving about as though she is mad. At least one of them believes that she is insane.”<sup>149</sup> Kiin’s desire to calm and restrain Cambara, whose actions resemble those of an excitable child, reveal that she is not exempt from the guidance or oversight of

---

<sup>146</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. p. 367.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* p. 418.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p. 418.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p. 418.

her practically minded counterparts. Kiin, who turns down a role in Cambara's play, explains that she must attend to the more pressing task of raising her children as a single mother. Cambara's lack of direction and confusion highlights the way she projects a private fantasy onto less favorable circumstances.

While *Knots* suggests that the combined and cooperative efforts of multiple individuals can lend stability to the nation in the absence of the state, it expresses its distrust of efforts that are taken on independently, given that they may concentrate authority in potentially harmful ways. It suggests that optimism and idealism about social change must be tempered with a conscious assessment of immediate needs and problems. Here, humanitarian acts that are focused on the future instead of the here-and-now evolve into deliberate and therefore ill-intentioned maneuvers to make reality conform to unrealistic expectations. As SilkHair confesses to Cambara, he leaves The Refuge because Bile imposes rigid standards and presents an artificial demeanor that makes him a figure with whom he cannot identify. Bile's inflexibility causes SilkHair to join a militia. Here, the failure to frame expectations in terms of a human need for authentic recognition and acceptance impedes the realization of altruistic goals. *Knots*, like *Links*, shows that an inability to recognize the differences between self and other causes the nation-state to become the site onto which the internal desires, aspirations and conflicts of the diasporic citizen are narcissistically projected.

## 4.5 Synthetic Ties and National Regeneration in *Crossbones* (2011)

In *Knots*, Cambara seeks to reunite Gacal with his mother at the same time that she assumes responsibility for his well-being. Although Cambara's concern for the wayward youths of *Knots* fails to account for the actual nature of their existence, Farah illustrates the importance of these adoptive commitments given the chaos that permeates the nation and, as a result, unsettles the domestic sphere. The significance of these adoptive and cross-generational commitments also comes to the fore in *Crossbones*. The final installment of Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy, *Crossbones* attempts to undermine a narrative that links the failure of the Somali nation-state to a globally circulated and marketable narrative of piracy and the alleged corruption of Somali pirates.<sup>150</sup> Grappling with the murky nature of piracy, *Crossbones* seeks to impart, like its fictional Somali-American journalist, Malik, a degree of clarity to an ill-defined political situation. What is at stake is the question of the pirates' motivations, their identity and, most significantly, how to undermine a view of the pirates that identifies them with a neoliberal sphere of global business and, in turn, straightforwardly links them with the failure of the state. The novel's complex representation of the pirates, whose loyalties and interests are unclear, echoes its representation of the ill-defined motivations and political status of the young Shabaab recruit Taxlil. *Crossbones* asks: how might one consider the ill-defined ideological motivations and disruptive actions of rogue individuals like Taxlil apart from the dysfunctional nature of the family (the unit which in Farah's work appears as an alternative to the impracticable idea of a cohesive Somali nation)? Similarly, how can the motivations of the pirates, equally opaque and uneasily associated with the global, be distinguished from the disorder of the

---

<sup>150</sup> Farah, beyond the scope of the novel, has repeatedly offered a more redemptive view of the pirates against that which dominates global media outlets, stating that while he does not condone the hostage-taking activities that they have engaged in, "Somali pirates do not live the high life, nor do they receive the sums being mentioned, because much of the money stays either in Abu Dhabi or London, where it is banked." See *The Wall Street Journal* (Arts and Entertainment blog) and "Not all Somalis are Pirates and We Have Been Victims Too" (July 17, 2012).

state? *Crossbones* uses parallel narratives to explore the potential correlation between the decline of the family and the instability of the state: Ahl's search for his stepson, Taxlil, and the motivations behind Taxlil's sudden departure from Minneapolis and his younger brother Malik's search for the truth about the Somali pirates. The tension that undergirds this parallelism shows that, in *Crossbones*, the disorder of the family, which lies at the core of the would-be "national" sphere, seems to be detrimentally bound up with the political failure of the state.

*Crossbones* emphasizes, through its representation of divergent voices, the fragile state of the family. Patricia Alden observes that unending political conflict has weakened the idea of the "nation" in Somalia and led to the breaking apart of the family: "[Farah's] artistic response to these historical circumstances has been to bring the politics of the interpersonal and domestic sphere, which have always been of intense concern to him, back to the center of his stage...and to explore more fully than before the possibilities of the family as we *do not* know it."<sup>151</sup> In *Crossbones*, a proliferating web of criminal activity undergirds the order that the Islamic courts, who have links to extremist groups, seem to impose. An impending Ethiopian attack galvanizes the extremist military wing of the Islamists, Shabaab, who recruit impressionable youths into their service. *Crossbones* tracks the journeys of Malik and Ahl as they visit their ancestral homeland for the first time. Accompanied by Malik's father-in-law, Jeebleh, the brothers venture into unfamiliar territory in order to locate Taxlil, whose disappearance from Minneapolis is the result of his recruitment as a martyr for Shabaab. The novel draws attention to the focalized perspectives of multiple characters (several, including Jeebleh, appear in *Links* and *Knots*) in order to highlight the cross-generational and interfamilial tensions that threaten to destroy the family. For example, the focalization of the novel highlights the cautiousness and weariness of Jeebleh, who belongs to an older generation of Somalis,

---

<sup>151</sup> Alden, Patricia. *Nuruddin Farah*. p. 110.

born and raised in Somalia before leaving their country of birth. Jeebleh's weariness of the violence generated by political crisis contrasts with the risk-taking and determined nature of a younger generation who belong to the Somali diaspora. *Crossbones* emphasizes the rifts that affect the characters' immediate family, focusing on the differences that increasingly set Ahl and Malik at odds, and on Ahl's sense of failure in the wake of his stepson's disappearance.<sup>152</sup> *Crossbones* attributes Ahl's sense of failure to his self-identification as Taxlil's father and his fatherly responsibility. *Crossbones* optimistically gestures toward the possible resurrection of the family despite its precipitous decline. The characters' divergence from an ethos of responsibility, which consists of upholding a moral commitment to family that extends across generational divides, in favor of the pursuit of self-interest explains the trilogy's increasingly insular tone and suspicion of the global.

The novel emphasizes the unmoored state of the family through the mistake of a young Shabaab recruit that calls up the volatility of the nation's youth. Charged with the responsibility of setting up a safe house in anticipation of an Ethiopian counterattack, YoungThing is led astray by Cambara who, aware of the threat he poses as a military insurgent, sends him in the wrong direction. The incongruous nature of YoungThing's appearance, diminutive in size but carrying a bag heavier than himself, throws into relief the disoriented state of Somalia's youth: "[Cambara] wonders if he is a grown man with the voice of a boy, or a boy in the body of a man."<sup>153</sup> The danger to which Farah alludes lies in the Somali youth's naïve association of participating in an extremist and violent political enterprise with the consolidation of personal autonomy. "Small in stature [but] huge in

---

<sup>152</sup> While Farah's work is often noted for its nuanced portrayal of women, women are of secondary importance in *Crossbones* and are frequently shown to create impediments that hinder the progress of their male counterparts. The characters that belong to a younger generation of Somalis in *Crossbones* share a desire for autonomy and authority. This desire is figured in male centric terms as the bulk of the novel is filtered through the lens of YoungThing, Malik and Ahl, each eager to establish their professional worth, their social power, or their dependability as the family patriarch.

<sup>153</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 2.

ambition,” YoungThing wants to impress those who “do not think highly of him.”<sup>154</sup> YoungThing’s “youthful bravado” and desire to be taken seriously, when viewed in light of the fatal consequences of being led astray, betrays a naiveté and misguidedness that illuminates the impetuous nature of Taxlil’s involvement with Shabaab. Indeed, Taxlil’s broken spectacles, which prevent him from fighting, underscore this profound sense of disorientation.<sup>155</sup> When the two men YoungThing asks for directions send him to a property occupied by one of their business rivals with the intention of settling a personal grievance, the text further underscores YoungThing’s status as an insignificant pawn in “the intricate political games adults play.”<sup>156</sup> YoungThing, who is unclear about the details of his assignment, reflects the unstable location of individual autonomy in a “political game” whose terms are anything but clearly defined.<sup>157</sup> The text emphasizes the instability of Somalia’s youth in the equally tenuous fate of the nation’s older members. The house YoungThing mistakes for the safe house belonged to a once important and propertied man, Dhorre. This is the first allusion of many in the novel to a deteriorating set of once capable men beset by confusion, illness, and anxiety. *Crossbones* sets up the “befuddled” Dhorre, unsure of how to counter the hostile advances of YoungThing, as a representative of the inadequacies and naiveté of an older generation when it demonstrates the ease with which positions of authority may be usurped.<sup>158</sup> Here, the mistakes of a younger generation are amplified by the shortcomings of a generation out of touch with its surroundings.

In *Crossbones*, the difficulty facing the diasporic citizen lies in understanding and grasping the nuances of an increasingly fraught political situation. In the novel, the parallelism between Ahl and

---

<sup>154</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 1.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p. 47.



Malik revolves around their pursuit of information in a hazy and enigmatic landscape. As Ahl suggests, the diasporic citizen is immediately put at a disadvantage: “News arriving from Somalia is often no more than hearsay bolstered by scuttlebutt, fueled by rumor.”<sup>159</sup> However, this confusion is not allayed on the ground but amplified to an extent not seen in *Links* or *Knots*. Whereas characters in *Links* and *Knots* are forced to wade through the ambiguities of their surroundings, *Crossbones* foists this task upon the reader. The novel unveils an endlessly proliferating and unwieldy web of relationships, events, points of view and details. Although seemingly meant to serve a didactic purpose (the novel orients the reader with knowledge of the nation’s history and present-day conflicts), it refutes claims to certainty even as it extends an invitation to move past the discomfort of not knowing. The image that encapsulates this confusion is the Bakhaaraha market, which appears as a “labyrinthine” maze and functions not only as a nexus of economic but also as a site of political activity outside mainstream institutions: “This market looks nothing like anyone’s idea of an African market. . . . to confound the visitor more, one sees all sorts of people milling around, and many more gathered at corners, loitering, watching, gathered in groups, bantering, a few strolling about with whips in their hands and conversing with men bearing guns.”<sup>160</sup> Perhaps more vividly than *Links* and *Knots*, *Crossbones* also encapsulates the temporal logic of the trilogy’s namesake, the past imperfect tense, as it creates the impression that multiple events are still unraveling or taking place at a single point in the recent past of the story. This temporal logic, in turn, generates the effect of epistemological uncertainty, confusion and chaos where “uncertainty reigns supreme.”<sup>161</sup> The novel largely eschews temporal markers, blocking attempts to arrange events in chronological time. For example, the novel does not present the events that comprise YoungThing’s encounter

---

<sup>159</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 42.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* p. 153.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

with Dhorre in one discrete section, choosing to insert the narratives of Ahl and Jeebleh between them. This presents an overall effect of contemporaneity while emphasizing the divergent trajectories of the characters who seem, as a result, to be working at cross-purposes. Uncertainty in *Crossbones* is also heightened by the nebulous nature of the relationships the characters form (with whom are they associating and will this compromise or further their goals?). The uncertainty and instability that the novel expresses about knowledge and identity also works to question the authority of a global media intent on imparting epistemological coherence where none is to be had. In other words, the problem of reading, constituting or inferring identity that the characters encounter reiterates their inability to know *fully* or grasp the details that make up the conflict at hand. It insists that the pursuit of knowledge with the purpose of reconstructing a story whose subject promises to be of interest to a global audience should not come at the expense of promoting national stability. In *Crossbones*, Farah suggests that writing about the nation from a global vantage point (often in order to tell its story to a Western audience) tends to systematically compromise claims to national loyalty. The desire to preserve the remaining center of national stability, the family, is at odds with a need to communicate what appears as a marketable story of state failure. The power of the global media to distort the origins of this failure through widely accessible narratives disrupts the ability to think the state in terms beyond dysfunction and disorder, which transform it into a global commodity.

In *Crossbones*, the brothers' pursuit of information about the pirates illuminates the disparity between a media-based image of the pirates and a more complex national reality. In *Crossbones*, Ahl carefully seeks information from Fidno, a mediator between the pirates and the negotiators working for ship owners. Although Fidno claims that he acts as a "go-between" in order to resolve conflicts between the pirates and ship owners, he presents Ahl with photographs of young men who

resemble pirates, which creates suspicion in Ahl's mind about how he acquired them.<sup>162</sup> Despite these doubts, *Crossbones* intimates, however briefly, Ahl's inclination to question the received image of pirates as self-sustaining millionaires: "Why, he thinks, if Fidno or the pirates were flush with money, would he need a stranger to buy him a meal or a packet of cigarettes?"<sup>163</sup> Indeed, Fidno eats both his and Ahl's meals. The novel implies, furthermore, that although Ahl has difficulty "accepting [Fidno's] claims at face value," doubting his assertion that he took up his role as mediator in order to "avenge" the Somali fishermen (whom he views as the victims of their foreign competitors who caused damage to the fishing environment), Ahl acknowledges that his judgment is potentially "colored by the previous brushes with professional misconduct that Fidno has described."<sup>164</sup> Ahl's flashes of insight work to set him apart from Malik, who does not evaluate his own biases. Malik's interview with Fidno suggests the marketability of a narrative that links the pirates to immense wealth and illicit activities. Attempting to discern Fidno's character, Malik immediately notes that he "look[ed] like a character of out of a crime novel."<sup>165</sup> After insisting that the Somali pirates have not received the money to which they are entitled, Fidno asks Malik to correct the world's erroneous impression of the pirates. However, when Malik poses a question, Fidno reflects on the way Malik's choice of words presents the pirates in an unfavorable light: "Now I insist that you reformulate your question so that I have a fair crack at it."<sup>166</sup> Speaking of a rhetoric course he took in university, Fidno argues that his professor's example of an attorney who questioned a husband accused of beating his wife mirrors Malik's mode of interrogation, which

---

<sup>162</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 105.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* p. 214.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* p. 212. See also, Gettleman, Jeffrey. "Somali Pirates tell their Side: They Only Want Money." *The New York Times: Africa*. The New York Times. September 30, 2008. Web. November 17 2014 for how some Somali fishermen became pirates.

<sup>165</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 361.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* p. 363.

renders the pirate's criminal activity an indisputable fact. Malik's partiality presents an unsavory view of a self-serving global media—a force whose ethical integrity is rarely questioned despite the ease with which it constructs commodifiable images.<sup>167</sup> Malik reveals that he “has no reason to disbelieve [Fidno].”<sup>168</sup> However, he relentlessly follows a particular line of questioning that seeks to confirm reports by the Western media (the BBC and *The Guardian*) of the pirates' decadent lifestyles. Although Malik asserts that it is his responsibility to exhaust all possibilities in order to ascertain the truth, *Crossbones* suggests that the information Malik seeks out corresponds to a preconceived notion of the pirates.

Malik views the crisis besieging Somalia as an opportunity to bolster his journalistic credentials. As he surveys Mogadiscio with Jeebleh, Malik “writes away furiously, happy with the tour” while Jeebleh “suffers in shocked sadness.”<sup>169</sup> When Bile asks Malik whether he will draw attention to the suffering of innocent civilians who are often the victims of long-distance American attacks during the Ethiopian-Somali conflict, Malik's avoidance of the question suggests his self-interest: “Malik pretends not to hear the question, because he doesn't see any point in answering.”<sup>170</sup> Malik contrasts Jeebleh's disapproval of his choice to interview the pirates with Bile's apparent support. However, as Malik himself observes, Bile probably supports him because Malik has not revealed the names of his interviewees. Malik ignores this possibility and, instead, explains Bile's unquestioning air in terms of the fact that Bile, like himself, is supportive of Somalia: “He attributes Bile's understanding to his own obstinate loyalty to Somalia by staying on, despite all the

---

<sup>167</sup> Ali Riaz and Anthony DiMaggio write that both global media and global capital “undermine the socio-political-economic organizations of the nation-state by subverting their authority and by operating largely outside of their control (115).” See “The Nation State, The Global Media and the Regime of Supervision” in *Discipline and Punish in Global Politics: Illusions of Control* (Ed. Janie Leatherman)

<sup>168</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 365.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* p. 79.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p. 356.

drawbacks.”<sup>171</sup> In highlighting Bile’s loyalty to Somalia, Malik frames his pursuit of a potentially lucrative story in terms of a commitment to the nation. However, Malik’s decision to stay in Somalia at the expense of his safety is also, as the novel intimates, a reflection of the opportunism of reality-show contestants who seek to avoid eviction in order to receive “a large cash prize at the end.”<sup>172</sup> The novel’s early indictment of the Western commentators who blithely paint entire regions as “terrorist territories” alerts readers to the sensationalism that distorts national realities.<sup>173</sup> The global media’s disregard for facts is compounded by Malik’s arrogant dismissal of Somali journalists who have chosen to remain in the country, a disregard that highlights a tendency to belittle other perspectives without giving them due consideration. This arrogance is displayed in Malik’s characterization of local journalists like Gumaad whom he not only suggests write poorly, under-researched pieces “sloppily conceived and shakily held together by a myriad of prejudices,” but also labels a liar and spy of the Courts.<sup>174</sup> Although the novel does not reveal Gumaad’s intentions, it often points to Gumaad’s good intentions and his honesty and, in doing so, casts Malik’s suspicions in an unfavorable light.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, although Malik admits that “he doesn’t know many ordinary people in Mogadiscio,” he paints a lurid picture of the people’s violence and motivations:<sup>176</sup>

They’d wait for their payback day with due patience. And when that day comes, they will dance around the enemy dead, singing and kicking the corpses and burning effigies, giving in to the debasing pleasure of poisoning themselves with the toxins of

---

<sup>171</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. 356.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>174</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 85. When it suits Malik, he uses Gumaad and Fee-Jigan (local journalists) to gain information that will help him realize his objectives. Gumaad, for instance, helps Malik get an interview with Ma Gabadeh, a funder of the Somali pirates.

<sup>175</sup> Although Gumaad is accused of lying, Malik’s point of view exposes the possibility that his intentions are genuine: “Up close, Gumaad’s appearance bespeaks his true mental state. Tears well in the corners of his eyes. He does not seem to be lying, and perhaps he isn’t” (231).

<sup>176</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 225.

vengeance. They will, in essence, take self-debasing pleasure in poisoning their souls, as one proverb has it, with the toxin that is vengeance. The world is no longer what the world used to be. Besides, Mogadiscians have done it before: danced a macabre, self-dishonoring dance around a dead Marine, and nothing will stop them from repeating that.<sup>177</sup>

Malik transposes past wrongdoings and violence onto the present, failing to expose the cruelties that, as *Links* reminds its readers, accompanied American military intervention. Moreover, although Malik suggests that the Somali people are held hostage by vengeful impulses, he, too, seeks out BigBeard, a member of the religious courts, for no apparent purpose and against the warnings of Dajaal's son, who works with his father as a security escort: "He ruined my visit on my first day, and I won't forgive myself if I do not do a little to disrupt the flow of his life and then write about it."<sup>178</sup> These comments emphasize the mindlessly provocative and lurid nature of Malik's actions in such a way that illuminate his self-serving journalistic approach. Similarly, although Malik writes that the national crisis is one that "a near stranger like me cannot make sense of" he continues to present a firm evaluation of the situation that, once again, plays up the "degeneracy" of the nation, which has "nothing to do with clan or religious rivalries" but "a lot to do with personal gains and personality conflicts."<sup>179</sup> Ironically, this element of private gain motivates Malik's opportunistic exploitation of the nation's crisis because unlike Ahl, who is uncomfortable in the presence of others' suffering, given that "the intimate affairs of this nation are fodder for gossip . . . and newspaper headlines elsewhere," Malik "without regret moves in deeper, excited to ferret about in other people's heightened emotions; to eavesdrop on their sorrows . . . and intrude on their private and public

---

<sup>177</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 225.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. p. 245.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p. 297.

personae.”<sup>180</sup> Farah’s characterization of Malik, unlike that of Jeebleh or Cambara, consistently highlights his lack of self-awareness and sadistic tendencies as he consciously exploits the suffering of ordinary Somalis for private gain.

*Crossbones* condemns Malik’s self-interest because it does not consider the impact of such self-interest on the fate of the family. Against Ahl’s resolve to find Taxlil, *Crossbones* raises doubts about Malik’s commitment to preserving the well-being of his family. Ahl fears that his dealings with Fidno will compromise his ethical integrity: “Is this what children do to you, knowingly or unwittingly, make you into an accomplice of outlaws?”<sup>181</sup> Despite these fears, Ahl overlooks the potential liabilities of befriending Fidno in order to obtain information about Taxlil. When Ahl urges Malik to reconsider his decision to interview TheSheikh (the head of the Courts, who is attempting to flee Mogadiscio) because it might hinder their chances of getting Taxlil home, the novel highlights Malik’s cautious agreement, given that “his brother might think that he places his professional advancement far above family loyalty.”<sup>182</sup> Ahl’s proposition that Malik conduct an interview with Fidno in order to facilitate his search for Taxlil causes Malik to conclude that this is merely a “development of second-water grade, as far as diamond discovery goes” and not the discovery of a “first-water quality gem.”<sup>183</sup> Evaluating news stories in terms of the diamond-grading scheme, Malik becomes emblematic of neoimperialistic figures intent on exploiting Africa’s natural resources. Here, as in *King Solomon’s Mines*, the plight of the family only matters insofar as it creates a space for material gain. *Crossbones* demonstrates that securing Taxlil’s safe return is, therefore, of lesser importance to Malik than the pursuit of a marketable and fame-granting story. Moreover, the

---

<sup>180</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 316; p. 325.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. p. 256.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. p. 233.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. p. 220.

presence of family members and their “solicitude” is irksome to Malik.<sup>184</sup> For instance, Malik does not welcome Jeebleh’s wish to protect him nor the irksome concern of his wife, Amran, who repeatedly questions his family loyalty. Malik also puts the members of other families in danger. For instance, Malik silences Dajaal’s warnings about Gumaad’s connection to militiamen working for the Courts in order to prevent him from isolating Gumaad, a valuable asset in Malik’s search for newsworthy events. Dajaal’s death (killed by an unknown assassin) causes “instant guilt to [prey] on [Malik’s] mind,” since the novel suggests that his death may have been attributed to individuals known to Gumaad.<sup>185</sup> Malik also endangers the life of Dajaal’s son, Qaasir, who is eventually killed during the ride back from Malik’s interview with Fidno. Here, the disorder created by self-interested individuals like Malik threatens to dissolve the family, which appears, through responsible figures like Ahl and Dajaal, as the locus of morality.

Increasingly pessimistic in its tone, *Crossbones* paints the global mainly in terms of its nefarious and corrupt aspects. Despite the threat to their lives, Ahl tries to gain Taxlil’s lawful recognition before the state of Djibouti. *Crossbones* revalorizes the family through Ahl and Taxlil’s reunion and arrival in Djibouti where immigration authorities question them and they “[wait] for their condition to be clarified.”<sup>186</sup> Although it is unclear what fate awaits them, *Crossbones* gestures, through the trope of “purgatorial” “in-between[ness]” at the possibility of cathartic renewal: this is a state in which Ahl and Taxlil have “the opportunity to gain a spiritually more satisfactory cleansing.”<sup>187</sup> In evoking a language of atonement, Farah posits that father and son will both have to revisit and account for past sins. *Crossbones* does not grant the possibility of “spiritual cleansing” to Malik who hits another roadside bomb while driving with Qaasir and, physically debilitated, and

---

<sup>184</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. p. 23.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. p. 237.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 381.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p. 380.



ends up in an intensive care unit. Although *Link*'s Seamus observes that everyone in war is "potentially guilty," *Crossbones* emphatically assigns guilt to Malik even where Taxlil's wellbeing is not at stake.<sup>188</sup> Farah, therefore, leaves his reader with an uneasy image of a global presence reminded, in unequivocal terms, of its mortality. Here, the titular crossbones become pure symbol rather than a mere cautionary sign.

Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy displays a vivid awareness of the limitations that accompany the diasporic citizen-intellectual's attempts to speak about and on behalf of the nation from a position rooted in a privileged experience of the global. It tracks, in incremental shifts, the politico-ethical relationship of the diasporic individual to the nation-state in the sociopolitical imaginary of the Anglophone African novel. *Links* and *Knots* signal the possible creation of a productive and morally responsible relationship between a privileged self and national other. Both *Links* and *Knots* draw attention to the way in which their characters' must continuously negotiate global and national vantage points. While these negotiations are often individualistic, Farah celebrates these imperfections given that self-interest may catalyze action that serves a communal end. In these texts, the would-be nation-state seems to provide a space in which self-interest may comfortably reside and act as a mitigating force against all-encompassing forms of national identity. *Crossbones*, however, highlights a fundamental rupture in communication within the family. In *Crossbones*, therefore, the need to mitigate the fragility of the domestic sphere, which seems to stand as the last bastion of hope for rebuilding an increasingly defunct nation-state, negates the possibility of bringing a more individualistic form of identity to bear on the diasporic citizen's relationship to the nation-state.

---

<sup>188</sup> Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. p. 218.

# CONCLUSION

I for one always resisted the idea that this is ‘The Achebe School.’ Personally, I didn't want a school at all, and looking back at that generation and you not being aware what it was like to grow up in a situation in which you have no literature, in which you do not belong to the stories that are told, a period in which you went to school and passed through school, and you did not hear anything about yourself throughout that period — unless you went through that, it will be difficult to understand why there was all this to-do about writing our own stories, crafting our own style and so on.<sup>1</sup>

--Chinua Achebe

In an interview with Chinua Achebe, Helon Habila raises a question about the role of Heinemann's *African Writers Series* in cultivating a market for African literature that depended on the production of literary work whose thematic scope was always already defined by *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe's remarks on this subject reflect a distinct separation between his unasked-for position as a founder of “The Achebe School” and his commitment to claiming a space within which African stories (“our own stories”) could be told. Whether or not, as Habila observes, the stylistic and thematic relationship between Achebe's first novel and those of his contemporaries was “almost incestuous,” Achebe's response reaffirms the socio-historical and even possibly collaborative function of that relationship (creating a literature that could be called African) against the differentiation of African writers based merely on thematic choices. Achebe's voicing of a communal stance reiterates the privileged role he grants to the writer as a *griot* whose chief duty revolves around the “great mission” of enabling people to get “a second handle on reality so that when it becomes necessary to do so, we can turn to art to find a way out.”<sup>2</sup> Art, therefore, has a purpose defined as finding solutions to political realities. To think of art in other terms, as Achebe

---

<sup>1</sup> Habila, Helon. “An Interview with the Late Nigerian Author, Chinua Achebe” (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Rowell, Charles Henry. “Listening to Chinua Achebe: A Memory.” p. 228.

admits other artists might do, would be to belong to “those who have too much of the West in them.”<sup>3</sup> Achebe’s reluctance to lend his name to that body of work concerned with the representation of the colonial encounter in Africa might serve, however, to obscure those links that continue to connect him to a new generation of African writers whose work is suffused with an awareness of his legacy. This legacy revolves around the connection between art and politics that Achebe and his literary counterparts venerate. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s recent assessment that this younger generation of writers “dabble in politics and history” suggests that serious political themes are not a primary concern in the new literature.<sup>4</sup> His dismissive remarks indicate that a divergence from political and historical concerns compromises an unwritten social pact between the African writer and the nation. However, the new African novel rejects conventional understandings of the African writer’s role. It espouses, under the guise of authorial commitment, a resolutely non-political view of authorial identity that reaffirms the commitment of the Anglophone African writer to a private and global literary enterprise.

The new African literature marks an inward turn that reflects a move to separate the African novel from a commitment to finding solutions to the social and political problems that face the African continent. While literature, in Achebe’s formulation, should work to alleviate the debilitating effects of political conflict, the new literature suggests that the African novel should not be expected to perform this recuperative function. Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and Chris Abani’s *Graceland* express a desire to redefine the African writer’s responsibilities. The disillusioned characters that these novels feature demonstrate the new literature’s belief that art cannot exert a discernible impact on dire political situations. These novels claim that the revolutionary ideals embedded in the work of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 226-231.

<sup>4</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. “Mazrui and Achebe.” p. 5.

an earlier generation of African writers like Achebe and Ngũgĩ are largely impractical given the systematic and unabated abuse of the neocolonial state. Through the overt ironizing and caricaturizing of the idealistic, and even self-serving, dispositions of their revolutionary characters, Habila and Abani also reject the belief that social change emerges from nationalistic defiance. Their work illustrates that revolutionary struggle fails to improve existing circumstances and poses a threat to the individual and his or her aspirations. The new African novel suggests that struggle and political action in the name of the nation is as debilitating as the conditions that seem to demand it.

In distancing itself from a terrain of political concerns, the new literature attempts to legitimize individualistic pursuits although it continually faces the existential difficulty of realizing this goal. For instance, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland* illustrate that a commitment to self is essential but also suggest that this commitment is still at odds with dominant understandings of national commitment. The moralistic burden of severing the intellectual's ties to the nation contrasts with the feelings of entitlement to individual freedom that these novels express. *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland* reflect this tension through the trope of the socially neglected and alienated individual. These texts' conflation of private and public narratives of struggle reflects the characters' perception of this neglect. Their apparent preoccupation with the meaningless and unproductive nature of social struggle becomes the backdrop against which the writer-intellectual's frustrated desires for global recognition are expressed. The new novels' representation of solipsistic characters emphasizes a privileging of individualistic desires and communicates the novels' inability to reconcile the individual's needs with those of an impoverished community. Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) exemplifies this representational trend. In *Measuring Time* the twin brothers, Mamo and LaMamo dream of attaining fame by joining the Nigerian army. Mamo, who suffers from sickle cell anemia, is left at home while his able-bodied brother, who is ostensibly destined for glory, becomes a soldier.

The novel reflects Mamo's realization of the physical costs of nationalistic struggle. What begins as a melancholic inspection of the weaknesses of the physical body, unable to rise to social expectations, ends in a validation of the powers of introspection. While early representations of revolutionary struggle aimed to connect private struggle to a larger public consciousness to mold national sentiment, the new African novel emphasizes the need to reaffirm the autonomy of the private by abandoning a vision of self monolithically determined by national identity.

The new novels' representation of national struggle, often violent in nature, becomes a reflection of the intellectual's private struggle. What emerges, therefore, is a vivid explication or deliberate unfolding of internal struggle in relationship to ongoing political battles. It is not just, as Ali Erritouni and Adélékè Adéèkó rightly observe with respect to new Nigerian writers, that they refute the viability of revolutionary struggle and a nationalist credo of self-sacrifice in order to assert an overriding commitment to self and life but also, arguably, that they have created a new space from which to explore individual subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> If violence in the work of Ngũgĩ and Ayi Kwei Armah exemplifies the inescapability of political turmoil, violence in novels like *Graceland* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* communicates the volatility of middle-class identity and the individual's desire for global mobility. For example, *Graceland's* emphasis on the violence of Elvis's surroundings must be understood in terms of his inability to identify or empathize with the victimized nation. Elvis's efforts to avoid reflecting on Efua's victimization illustrate the new African novel's attempt to divorce the individual from a morally inflected form of social obligation. When the text implicates Elvis in violent acts, it articulates the threat that the individual's continued existence within the nation poses. While these novels represent the guilt that its characters experience in their attempts to

---

<sup>5</sup> In "Power Shift: America in the new Nigerian Imagination" Adélékè Adéèkó writes that, in contrast to earlier Anglophone African novels, "loyalty to the homeland does not require that the activist/artist sacrifice his or her physical well being as an example to others" (12).

sever ties with the nation, they also attribute wrongdoing to the nation itself. The nation, in its inability to overcome these difficulties, seems to have betrayed the intellectual. The novels' representation of the individual's retreat into preoccupation with the self marks a continued disillusionment with the structures of neocolonial power and a profound dissatisfaction with the opportunities available for self-realization and personal growth in the nation. In Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010), for instance, the arrest of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and the violence of revolution in the wake of a military coup facilitate the novel's exploration of the difficulty of upholding a commitment to the self when confronted with the physical sacrifice of others. The novel foregrounds the psychological turmoil of Hailu, a doctor whose blanket refusal to support his son's revolutionary ambitions is shaken by the ethical necessity of taking action that places him squarely within the realm of revolutionary struggle. It also touches on the growing inauthenticity of socialist claims made by the middle class on behalf of a people from whom they have become distanced and, therefore, posits the need to reassess the extent to which those claims can speak to the needs of the greater population. In the new African novel, the struggle of the nation bears little if any relation in actuality to the struggle of the disenchanted intellectual.

The novels in this dissertation advance the claim that the African writer's legacy should be understood in terms of literary contributions. Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, in particular, articulates the belief that writing, in its distilled form, is an individual endeavor that expresses a unique creative voice. *Waiting* valorizes the creative process. In its extreme, it is a process that transcends all external constraints. Lomba's journalistic writing fails to capture the political conflict around him. It demonstrates, instead, the subversion of this political context inasmuch as it expresses his creative dexterity and ambition. Lomba's imprisonment also underlines the intellectual's perception of his work as commodity. Placing emphasis on the singularity of the

African writer's experience in which the individual works assiduously against the pressures of his environment, *Waiting* points repeatedly to the denigrated value of the writer's intellectual labor. Through its circular structural pattern, *Waiting* reiterates the stagnation of this creative process in terms of its economic context. The inevitable return to a scene of imprisonment signals the implausibility of achieving the necessary conditions for authorial success in the nation. Novels like *Waiting* describe the intellectual's private struggle for creative autonomy in terms of a battle for self-control and mastery over the self's most authentic desires. For example, Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) highlights the radical perspectival shift that marks different generations of a Nigerian family. Jessamy Harrison, the child of a British father and Nigerian mother, engages in an ongoing battle for control of her own identity. The creature of this imaginative self-division is Tilly-Tilly, a girl whose seemingly innocent claims to being Jess's living mirror image precipitate a desperate quest to reclaim ownership over her self. Jess, an introspective child, internalizes the rift between her mother and her grandfather, whose disapproval of her mother's choice to become a writer instead of a doctor reflects concerns about the relationship of new African writers to their literary forefathers. The individual's abandonment of a nationally determined view of self, while accompanied by a desire to stand free of judgment, is not, therefore, completely free of the moralistic weight of condemnation. This ideological tension nevertheless merely reaffirms the privileged content of the new African novel as that which revolves primarily around the frustrations and hopes of the individual.

The new African novel's concern with individual identity reflects the moral dilemma that the middle-class intellectual strives to displace. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Memory of Love* attempt to reconceive of the nation-state as a place in which the desires of a well-educated and elite group of individuals can take shape alongside the interests of the nation as a whole. Adichie and Forna's

novels temporarily establish new parameters of national belonging in an attempt to foster social understanding and collaboration. The gestures that these novels make toward social inclusiveness reflect an effort to reconcile personal and private narratives of development but ultimately show that the two are incompatible. In contrast, the early novels in Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy assert that self-interest may not necessarily obstruct productive engagement with the nation-state. In *Links* and *Knots*, Farah shows that the individual's private realm of experience need not overwhelm or undermine the integrity of attempts to speak or act on behalf of the nation. For Farah, the presence of individual self-interest may actually encourage a process of ethical reflection that actively considers the motives that drive the diasporic subject to forge links with the nation from a vastly different cultural and social perspective. Although these novels show that the well-intentioned global citizen often projects a private narrative of crisis onto the nation, *Links* and *Knots* suggest that it is still possible to play a role in bettering the nation if self-interest is acknowledged.

The possibility of narrowing the textual gap between the individual's needs and those of the nation is closely linked to whether the new novels are able to envision the nation-state's democratic future. In *Waiting for an Angel*, the intellectual's fantasy of self-realization takes shape against the backdrop of a conflict-ridden Nigeria. The hyperbolic and egocentric aspects of this fantasy reveal the text's belief that the nation-state cannot sustain conditions that would allow for an unencumbered expression of this self-interest. Similarly, *Graceland* gestures toward the realization of this fantasy when it shows that the horizon of the intellectual's self-realization is distinctly global. Elvis's inability to identify a mode of existence in the nation that does not compromise an idealized conception of selfhood free from sociopolitical responsibility frames the nation as an unchanging site of personal stagnation. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Memory of Love* trace a nostalgic return to an insular and dysfunctional vision of the nation-state. Unlike *Anthills of the Savannah*, they celebrate a



flawed revolutionary idealism that departs from a pragmatic and realistic plan of political reform. The novels' idealism, therefore, betrays an unwillingness to look beyond the claims of an elite group of individuals. Farah's *Crossbones*, too, highlights a shift toward nationalistic intolerance. In contrast to *Links* and *Knots*, it demonstrates that scrupulous self-awareness cannot withstand the pressures of a literary marketplace that opportunistically aligns national concerns with global interests. In *Crossbones*, the desire to represent, in a nuanced fashion, the problems that prevent the rehabilitation of the nation-state is at odds with the fact that such representation is always already shaped by an authorial position of global interest. The novel's rejection of a narrative of private gain illustrates that the circulation of a looming image of state failure in the global North overwhelms efforts to objectively discern the origins of the political disarray that affects the nation. The new African novel's inability to imagine productive forms of social reciprocity highlights the implausibility of political regeneration.

One key aspect of the African novel's indication of state failure is its belief that a meaningful democracy should enable both social and private economic growth. In the new African novel, the centrality of the theme of personal stagnation alludes to the value of the free market to society. Martin Wolf argues that the free market economy of globalization enables democracy: "A competitive market economy is a reflection—and a source—of freedom. It is also a necessary condition for democracy. In a society where political power determines the allocation of wealth, it is impossible to be independent without being powerful. But in a market society that combination is possible and this, in turn, provides a basis for competing political parties."<sup>6</sup> The new African novel expresses the belief that the intellectual cannot truly dictate the parameters of this private enterprise, determine the content of its products, or claim ownership of the literary object unless he can fully

---

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, Martin. *Why Globalization Works*. p. 54.

pursue his self-interest. In *Waiting for an Angel*, for instance, the complete materialization of this self-interest revolves around recognizing the intellectual's work as a desirable object in the global sphere of economic production. The novel alludes to classical liberalism's belief in the material dimensions of individual freedom; here society functions at an optimal standard when individuals can participate in a system of market exchange. The new African novel, therefore, upholds the principles of classical liberalism despite the absence of a free society. Classical liberalism makes a claim for the primacy of the individual and his or her freedom within society. *Graceland*, for example, expresses the individual's dissatisfaction with a national conception of selfhood dictated by an ideological framework that takes communal well-being as the moral precondition for attaining selfhood. Classical liberalism serves as the backdrop for the new literature's individualistic declarations because it subordinates the formative influence of politics and social institutions to the personal development and freedom of the individual. Acknowledging the liberal desires of the new African novel reveals that the terms in which individualism is conceived are ones that are, in the very least, partly grounded in the individual's quest for material progress in a global context.

The new African novel seeks to validate global recognition as a legitimate standard of creative achievement. The new African novel, therefore, arguably belongs to the sphere of World literature, exhibiting the tendencies of World literature that David Damrosch has outlined: it circulates beyond its culture of origin and reaches a wide audience across the globe, acquiring a marked presence in other literary systems. Achebe's debut novel, *Things Fall Apart*, clearly finds a place within the expanding literary network and is commonly featured on World literature syllabi. However, the type of recognition associated with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*—once reliant on the

whims of European publishers—is less elusive for the new generation of African writers.<sup>7</sup> As the young Nigerian writer Emmanuel Iduma notes, unlike the first generation of African writers who relied solely on print publication (governed mainly by the *African Writers Series*) to gain recognition, today’s writers have access to new modes of literary circulation: “Today, the idea that an audience is always within reach – online readers, agents, reviewers, prize judges – is the precondition of the African writer’s creative process. Meanwhile, if one is to follow Henry James’ advice to ‘Be one of those on whom nothing is lost,’ the Internet, in making everything within reach, has made the writer’s ambition infinite.”<sup>8</sup> The rapid proliferation of new avenues for literary production suggests that the African writer no longer needs to confine his personal ambition to one particular geographical location or seek to satisfy the tastes of an elite group of literary connoisseurs.

Calling attention to the need for efforts to increase the sustainability of African literature and its readership within the continent, Dan Ojwang and Michael Titlestad observe that the African novelist’s imagination of new audiences distances their work from the historical and political specificity of its founding concerns.<sup>9</sup> As Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay suggest, the economic hardships facing the continent prevent the creation of a local readership. They observe that the dysfunctional infrastructure on the continent and the rising poverty of Africans limit publishers’ access to local populations although the Internet has increased the amount of marketing possibilities to African

---

<sup>7</sup> In “Remembering Chinua Achebe,” Ifa Bayeza comments on the fortuitous nature of Achebe’s literary success: “A handwritten manuscript mailed overseas by a twenty-eight year old unknown. His only copy gets lost then found. Initially rejected for publication, the slim volume entitled *Things Fall Apart*, which debuts to mixed responses from a befuddled European literary establishment, goes on to become a modern literary classic, published in forty-five languages and selling over *ten million* copies” (223).

<sup>8</sup> Iduma, Emmanuel. “The Next Frontier for African Literature is African Publishing” (2013).

<sup>9</sup> See Ojwang, Dan and Michael Titlestad. “African Writing Blurs into ‘World’ Literature (2014)” on *The Mail and Guardian*. “This dilemma – writing about Africa without living in it – makes these novels accessible to non-African readers, but also, unfortunately, contorts the continent’s past and present. One’s imagined readership (from publishers and editors to the public) constitutes, in fundamental ways, the work one is writing. African literature written primarily for non-Africans – or, more specifically, those who are not Nigerian, Zimbabwean, Kenyan – is, by definition, less specifically textured.”

publishers by allowing new titles to be uploaded and distributed internationally and locally through the UK-based *ABC* (African Books Collective).<sup>10</sup> Iduma observes that there are established paths for writers to gain “self-validation”—foremost amongst them signing with an American publisher or submitting work to international literary journals.<sup>11</sup> He believes that the indigenization of African publishing will allow African literature to be read within its particular cultural and aesthetic context rather than the context that is easily imposed on it when it becomes an object of global consumption (i.e., “poverty porn”). This belief demonstrates an awareness that African writing seeking foreign publication participates “in the leveling process of a spreading global consumerism” as it caters to the tastes of foreign audiences.<sup>12</sup> The question of whether writers engage in hollowing-out of content in favor of increasing their visibility has, most recently, characterized mixed reviews of NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013). While Jim Hannan claims “Bulawayo humanizes personal hardship by avoiding platitudes and letting Darling speak her own truths,” Habila criticizes Bulawayo’s novel for its dilettante-like treatment of a “checklist” of issues conventionally associated with the continent (unabated violence, poverty, disease).<sup>13</sup> Habila’s suggestion that Bulawayo and other African writers should “[forget] her checklist and [go] unscripted” exposed him to the wrath of local reviewers who claim, conversely, that “[i]n Habila’s world and the Afropolitan’s generally, there is only space for stories about the African of the world, where the world is the West.”<sup>14</sup> Habila certainly seeks to deemphasize the national framework traditionally associated with African literature. However, the reviewer discounts Bulawayo’s membership in the so-called Afropolitan

---

<sup>10</sup> See Bgoya, Walter and Mary Jay. “Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day”. *Research in African Literatures*. 44.2 (2013): 17-34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Hannan, Jim. “We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo.” *World Literature Today*. 88.1 (2014): 55-56. See also Helon Habila’s 2013 review of *We Need New Names* in *The Guardian* online.

<sup>14</sup> Is Afropolitanism Africa's New Single Story? Reading Helon Habila's Review of “We Need New Names.” <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/need-new-names-bulawayo-review>

group. Bulawayo, as the reviewer observes of Habila, is also affiliated with a North American university and has received literary recognition in the West.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, while a new generation of African writers may have access to a range of opportunities for publication uncharacteristic of their literary forefathers, they still call upon a broadly nationalistic set of concerns (political crisis and social change) in order to present themselves to a global audience that continues to view Africa in those terms.

The categorization of new African literature as World literature reflects what Pascale Casanova would describe as the autonomy of literary space that asserts itself against a nationally determined realm of politics in order to accrue literary capital: “The most independent territories of the literary world are able to state their own law, to lay down the specific standards and principles applied by their internal hierarchies, and to evaluate works and pronounce judgments without regard for political and national divisions.”<sup>16</sup> As Casanova suggests, “it is this very capacity for being universalized, or denationalized, that allows varying degrees of autonomy among literary spaces to be recognized.”<sup>17</sup> Shortlisted for the Booker prize, *We Need New Names* demonstrates this capacity for universalization when it traces the trajectory of its protagonist’s journey from Zimbabwe to a suburb of Detroit. The critic and novelist Philip Hensher’s observation that *We Need New Names* touches on a range of social issues in Africa familiar to viewers of CNN supports Damrosch’s assertion that foreign novels in the United States risk poor distribution “unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the juxtaposition of Bulawayo and Jhumpa Lahiri, who despite her Indian origins is “widely considered an American author,” in the line-up of 2013 Booker winners may offer some indication of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Born in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo recently earned her MFA at Cornell and is a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford.

<sup>16</sup> Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* p. 18.

growing rootedness of the African novel in a literary sphere predominantly shaped by North American literary tastes and the African novel's implicit eschewal of the need to lay claim to a content premised on national identification.<sup>19</sup> If France, in Casanova's analytical configuration, underwent the process of becoming "the least national of literary nations" in the nineteenth century, "impressing the stamp of *littérarité* upon texts that came from farflung lands ... declaring them to be acceptable as legal tender in all the countries under its literary jurisdiction," then America today, as a literary superpower, seems to perform a similar function by reinforcing the links between the universal and literature as global commodity.<sup>20</sup>

In its articulation of a global horizon of self-realization, the new literature figures America as a space in which the ideals of classical liberalism can be upheld. The imagination of America in *Waiting for an Angel*, *Graceland* and *The Memory of Love* illuminates the transformation of the state into a site of affective instead of purely juridico-political identification. It also highlights a vision of citizenship that enables positive, self-affirming agency. In its ostensible commitment to individual autonomy, America becomes a spiritual touchstone for a communion with the self's innermost desires. Associated with the sea and, thus, a departure from Africa's shores in *Waiting* and *The Memory of Love*, America also reflects an unrestrained idealism and unmitigated belief in the possibility of political freedom and equality. America assumes a mythological status in the diasporic imaginary as a site of redemption. The new literature alludes to the fantasy of redemption and a kind of spiritual salvation that will allow the intellectual as a misanthropic figure to depart unencumbered from a communally oriented past and its demands. This spirit of optimism, which is linked to the success and viability of the American nation, is contrasted with a pronounced disillusionment with the African state's capability to realistically perform basic democratic functions. Although Adélékè

---

<sup>19</sup> See Clark, Nick. "Shock as Man Booker Prize Plans to Consider Works by American Writers."

<sup>20</sup> Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. p. 87.

Adéèkó rightly suggests that the transnational orientation of the new Nigerian novel means that it looks abroad for functional models of democracy in the hopes of implementing those models in the nation, the new African novel registers, in a belated fashion, the failure of this projected transformation.

This is not to say that the new literature's relationship to this vision of American democracy is not unencumbered by reservations or ambiguities. The new African novel asks whether this democratic vision can be realized now that America is no longer only a fantasy but also a sobering reality. While the full-fledged optimism associated with the new literature's imagining of America may have presented a straightforward opposition between the present of imprisonment and the future of freedom, the new literature also evokes a more restrained optimism that appears to unsettle this antithetical relationship. The new novels begin to focus on the paradoxes of a democratic vision of progress. They take stock of the limits placed on individual freedom. In the works of authors as diverse as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Dinaw Mengestu, we encounter characters whose lived experiences reflect the idea that elusive material success constrains individual freedom. Similarly, while racial identity did not assume a place of prominence in the past, race now becomes an inescapable marker and determinant of social status and belonging. Yet, at the same time that the new novels express such paradoxes, the possibility of an uncomplicated return to the nation is denied. The life trajectory of Bulawayo's fictional protagonist, Darling, which culminates in her relocation to suburban America, evinces the thrill and guilt of physical escape as well as the unshakeable discomfort of non-belonging. However, although Darling's brand of Afropolitanism makes overtures to preserving links with an African point of origin, the novel also suggests that the mere fact of the individual's escape renders all attempts at reconnection and reassimilation, regardless of intent, disingenuous: there is, for Bulawayo's Darling, no possibility of return. In place

of physical return, the new novels cast a backward glance towards the past. For example, in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), an Ethiopian immigrant remembers a past marred by the violence of the Ethiopian Civil War. The memory of the past's violence creates an ironic tone when contrasted with the degraded conditions of the protagonist's life in Washington, D.C. This trope of remembrance reflects a larger attempt in the new literature to determine the place of the past as a site of familial connections, conflict, and lapsed responsibility within a present in which evidence of that past no longer remains. It also serves to frame the past as a force that still exerts a palpable force on the immigrant's present-day experience.

The growing realization of the impossibility of return that these novels chart and its preoccupation with cultural assimilation or adaptation in America, arguably allows the Anglophone African novel to be read within the larger generic category of immigrant literature. The essayist Philip Lopate highlights the broad thematic outlines of immigrant fiction:

Strictly speaking, all American novels (with the exception of those written by Native Americans) are in one way or another immigrant fiction. But we usually think of immigrant fiction more narrowly as the encounter of the foreign-born with a presumably dominant Anglo-American culture. Thematically, this fiction is the site where self-invention encounters its limits, where compromise and accommodation wrestle with the unappeasable.<sup>21</sup>

According to Lopate's more narrow definition of the term, the work of writers like Teju Cole, and Taiye Selassie may be considered immigrant fiction as it foregrounds the experiences of African immigrants in America. Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), deemed "a truly American novel," follows

---

<sup>21</sup> Lopate, Philip. "Immigrant Fiction: Exploring An American Identity." *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of History*. <<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/literature-and-language-arts/essays/immigrant-fiction-exploring-american-identity>>



Julius, a Nigerian immigrant, and tracks his peripatetic journey around New York City.<sup>22</sup> The appearance of Adichie and Abani's short stories in Gerald Early and E. Lynn Harris's 2009 anthologized collection *Best African American Fiction* alludes to the possibility of placing the new African novel under the umbrella of American immigrant fiction.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Adichie's short story "Ceiling" opens the *Best American Short Story Collection* (2011), earning her a place alongside Joyce Carol Oates. Among the selection criteria that one of the collection's editors, Heidi Pitlor, notes is the publication of work "in English by writers who are American or Canadian, or who have made the United States their home."<sup>24</sup> The opening up of the prize's selection criteria to foreign-born nationals reflects the particular longevity, richness and broad readerly appeal of the diasporic and immigrant experience. Often written from the perspective of the social or national outsider, Adichie and Abani's work (*Americanah* and *The Virgin of Flames*) investigates the construction of individual identity in relationship to mainstream and marginalized cultures as well as race and gender. Similarly, in *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007), Dinaw Mengestu alludes to the shared oppression of poor Black communities and African immigrants in the face of a stunted American dream. This growing emphasis on the productivity of foreign, unexpected, or unconventional nodes of cultural belonging highlights the new African novel's desire to reconstitute notions of the individual and his or her relationship to a wider social universe.

The indeterminacy of the new writing, which hovers between national and cultural templates of belonging, indicates the current open-ended and evolving nature of its project to redefine the

---

<sup>22</sup> Publisher's Weekly on Amazon.com review of *Open City*. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4000-6809-8>

<sup>23</sup> See Dutt-Ballerstadt, Reshmi. "Gendered (Be)Longing: First- and Second-Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri." The question of how to categorize the new literature echoes the debate around Jhumpa Lahiri and her work as critics continue to ask, "Should Lahiri be considered a postcolonial writer or a South Asian American writer?" Is she an American or Indian writer? One factor that causes Lahiri to be considered an American writer is the consistent appearance of her work in both the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* and *The Norton Anthology of American literature*.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks and Pitlor. *The Best American Short Stories* (2011). p. xii.

individual within the context of migration. In this respect, the new literature's transnational and transcultural horizon calls up Ato Quayson's remarks on the need for postcolonial literary scholars "to evaluate the implications of the vast range of voluntary and enforced movements of populations that have taken place in world history for their impact on the imagination."<sup>25</sup> In one respect, the continuous movement of these populations produces an uncertainty around self-definition that is reflected in the current debate around the extent to which both native-born African writers and second-generation immigrant writers from Africa identify with the now ubiquitous term, Afropolitan. For example, the second-generation writer, Taiye Selasi, who coined the term in an effort to conjure up the multi-sited yet rooted nature of her identity encountered resistance from another second-generation writer, Marta Tveit, who expressed her uneasiness with Selasi's move to speak on behalf of others like herself. Tveit observes that, even beyond the socioeconomic exclusiveness of the term itself, she cannot pinpoint "what would justify grouping these people together, other than that they all happen to have one or more parent who define themselves as coming from a country in Africa, [and] that is not enough."<sup>26</sup> Tveit's critique also highlights the commodifiable aspects of an "Afropolitan" genre of writing, which counter to its stated desire, she alleges, actually reduces African identity to fixed properties that make it more palatable to a Western audience. Beyond this critique, however, this debate illustrates the stakes of self-definition, the fraught nature of the claims made with respect to the identity of a more visibly mobile group of African writers, and the desire of some members of this group to discern and depict new forms of

---

<sup>25</sup> Quayson, Ato. "Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary." p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> See Tveit, Marta. "The Afropolitan Must Go" (2013) on *Think Africa Press*. Selasi's parents are of Nigerian and Ghanaian origin and she was raised in the United States and mentored by Toni Morrison. As the British *Telegraph* observes, Selassie reflects what she has herself called an Afropolitan identity given that it exceeds geopolitical confines: she "is not quite African and not quite American. She is not Maya Angelou, writing about American poverty or segregation, and she is not Chinua Achebe, writing about colonialism in African villages."

social lineage or identity.<sup>27</sup> Apollo Amoko's observation that autobiographies and the *Bildungsroman* have "provided important avenues for African writers to explore new ways of being in the colonial and postcolonial worlds" is particularly relevant given the representational trend that foregrounds the negotiation of new modes of belonging.<sup>28</sup> If as Amoko suggests, the use of autobiography in the African novel is implicitly linked to the tradition of slave narratives like Equiano's, the autobiographical strain in the new writing, which seems to evoke the post-ness of the postcolonial world, may provide African writers with a means from which to chart the immigrant experience in America. In this respect, therefore, one area of future exploration might center on the autobiographical bent of the new writing and how this concern with self is reflected in the formal devices that it enlists. Exploring the new African novel's narration of self may also reveal the extent to which its articulation of middle-class individualism dovetails with the political, economic and social concerns of American fiction of immigration.

The new African novel asserts that addressing the nature and aspirations of individuals is at odds with a commitment to the nation-state. In doing so, it illuminates the insincerity and disaffection attached to the African intellectual's present engagement with the nation. The new African novel, therefore, seeks out a space of self-realization that can accommodate a form of intellectual identity that is not political or grounded in social obligation. This process of abandoning a deeply politicized vision of authorial identity produces contradictory effects given that the new literature has yet to fully articulate its new content in a way that does not bear the ideological traces of an older generation of African writers. The new novels begin to chart a different trajectory of political affiliation within the context of diaspora and migration. This imagined trajectory takes

---

<sup>27</sup> See Wood, Gaby. "Waterstones Eleven: interview with Taiye Selasi." See also, "Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)"

<sup>28</sup> Amoko, Apollo. "Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to African Literature*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. p. 197.

America, as a symbol of economic prosperity and social mobility, as its culminating point. In its desire for global mobility, the new literature demonstrates that the individual rather than society is democracy's most privileged object of transformation.

# Bibliography

- Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. New York: Picador, 2004.
- . *The Virgin of Flames*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Abbot, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Ed. David Herman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- . *A Man of the People*. New York: Anchor Books, 1989.
- . *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Knopf, 1992.
- . *No Longer At Ease*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- . "Africa's Tarnished Name" in *Multiculturalism and Hybridity in African Literatures*. Eds. Hal Wylie and Bernth Lindfors. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2000. 13-24.
- . "The Novelist as Teacher" in *African Literature: An Anthology of Literature and Criticism*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- . Interview by Helon Habila. *The African Report*. The Africa Report, 2013. Web.10 March 2014.  
<<http://www.theafricareport.com/West-Africa/an-interview-with-late-nigerian-author-chinua-achebe-by-helon-habila.html>>.
- Adams, Lorraine. "Battle Scars." *The New York Times: Sunday Book Review*. The New York Times. 31 2009. Web. 16 November 2014.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/books/review/Adams-t.html>>.
- Adèèkó, Adélékè. "Power Shift: America in the new Nigerian Imagination". *The Global South* 2.2 (2008): pp. 10-30.
- Adesanmi, Pius and Chris Dutton. "Third Generation Nigerian Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations." *English in Africa*. 32.1 (2005): 7-19.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience." *Transition* 99 (2008): 42-53.
- . *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

- . "The Danger of a Single Story." TED Talks, July 2009. Web. 1 April 2014.  
<[http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)>.
- . "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. African Writes 2012 Lecture." African Writes: Royal African Society Lecture. London. June 30 2012.
- . *Americanah*. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Afolayan, Sola. "African Literature: A Showcase for Africa's Leadership Problems." *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 39 (2011): 27-39.
- Akin, Adesokan. "New African Writing and the Question of Audience." *Research in African Literatures* 43.3 (2012): 1-20.
- . *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Alden, Patricia. Ed. Bernth Lindfors. *Nuruddin Farah*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.
- Alter, Alexandra. "Fiction's Global Crime Wave." *The Wall Street Journal*. The Wall Street Journal. 1 July 2010. Web. 18 November 2014.  
<[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703426004575338763878488670.html?mod=WSJ\\_LifeStyle\\_LeadStoryNA](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703426004575338763878488670.html?mod=WSJ_LifeStyle_LeadStoryNA)>.
- Amoko, Apollo. "Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to African Literature*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 195-298.
- Andrade, Susan. Z. "Realism, Reception, 1968, and West Africa." *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 289-308.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 336-57.
- . "Citizens of the World" in *Globalizing Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1999*. Ed. Matthew J. Gibney. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 189-232.
- . "Nuruddin Farah." *Bomb* 87 (2004): 54-59.
- . *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

- Attree, Lizzy. "The Caine Prize and African Writing." *Research in African Literatures*. 44.2 (2013): 35-47.
- Awosika, Olawale. "The Educated Elite and the Leadership Initiative in Postcolonial West Africa: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*." *Education* 129.2 (2008): 287-293.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Baucom, Ian. "A Study in African Realism." *Public Books*. Public Books. 1 November 2013. Web. 7 April 2014.  
<<http://publicbooks.org/fiction/a-study-in-african-realism>>.
- Bayeza, Ifa. "Remembering Chinua Achebe." *Callaloo*. 36.2 (2013): 223-225.
- Beckman, Ludvig. *The Liberal State and the Politics of Virtue*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2001.
- Bell, Catharine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Bgoya, Walter and Mary Jay. "Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day". *Research in African Literatures*. 44.2 (2013): 17-34.
- Biodun, Jeyifo. "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory". *Research in African Literatures* 21.1 (1990): 33-48.
- Booker, Keith M. "The African Historical Novel." *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. 141-159.
- Brown, Nicholas. "African Literature, Modernism and the Problem of Political Subjectivity." *Novel* 41.2/3 (2008): 264-278.
- Bryce, Jane. "'Half and Half Children': Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel." *Research in African Literatures* 39.2 (2008): 49-67.
- Bulawayo, NoViolet. *We Need New Names*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2013.
- Bystrom, Kerry. "Humanitarianism, Responsibility, *Links, Knots*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. 16:3 (2014): 405-423.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M.B. Debevoise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Cassels, Alan. *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Cheah, Peng. *Spectral Nationality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

- Chrisman, Laura. *Rereading the Imperial Romance*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000.
- Clark, Nick. "Shock as Man Booker Prize Plans to Consider Works by American Writers." *The Independent*. The Independent. 15 September 2013. Web. 10 March 2014.  
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/shock-as-man-booker-prize-plans-to-consider-works-by-american-writers-8818052.html>>.
- Colson, Robert L. "Arresting Time, Resisting Arrest: Narrative Time and the African Dictator *Wizard of the Crow*." *Research in African Literatures* 42.1 (2011): 133-153.
- Crehan, Stewart. "Phantasy and Repression in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*." *Research in African Literatures* 26.4 (1995): 104-120.
- Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Oxford: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd, 2004.
- Danow, David K. *Spirit of Carnival: Magic Realism and the Grotesque*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1995.
- Davies, Catriona. "Young Writers Start a New Chapter in Nigerian Literary History." CNN. October 1 2010. Web. November 10 2014.  
<<http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/09/21/nigerian.authors/>>
- Dawson, Ashley. "Surplus City: Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *Graceland*." *Interventions* 11.1 (2009): 16-34.
- 'Dele Maxwell, Ugwanyi. "Postcolonialism and the Politics of Resistance: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 4.5 (2011): 218-247.
- Dutt-Ballerstadt, Reshmi. "Gendered (Be)Longing: First- and Second-Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri." *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Eds. Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.
- Erritouni, Ali. "Contradictions and Alternatives in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.2 (2006): 50-74.
- ". "Postcolonial Despotism from a Postmodern Standpoint: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*." *Research in African Literatures*. 41.4 (2010): 145-161.
- Eze, Chielozona. "Cosmopolitan Solidarity: Negotiating Transculturality in Contemporary Nigerian Novels." *English in Africa* 32.1 (2005): 99-112.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.



- Farafina Trust*. The Farafina Trust, 2009. Web. November 2014.  
<<http://farafinatrust.org>>
- Farah, Nuruddin. *Links*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Knots*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.
- . *Crossbones*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.
- “Fiction Book Review: *Open City* by Teju Cole. *Publishers Weekly*. n.d. Web. Nov. 9. 2014.  
<<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4000-6809-8>>.
- Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. New York: Grove Press, 2010.
- Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- Gagiano, Anne. “Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in Novels by Fornata, Atta, and Farah.” *ARIEL* 44.1 (2013): 45-72.
- Gammel, Irene. *Sexualizing Power in Naturalism: Theodore Dreiser and Frederick Philip Grove*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gérard, Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Gettleman, Jeffrey. “Somali Pirates Tell their Side: They Only Want Money.” *The New York Times: Africa*. The New York Times. September 30 2008. Web. November 17 2014.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/01/world/africa/01pirates.html>>.
- Gibson, Nigel C. *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA. Polity and Blackwell, 2003.
- Gikandi, Simon. “The Postcolonial Wizard: *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o” (Review). *Transition*. 98 (2008): 156-169.
- . *Reading the African Novel*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1987.
- Habila, Helon. “We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo (Review).” *The Guardian*. The Guardian. 20 June 2013. Web. 10 March 2014.  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/need-new-names-bulawayo-review>>.
- . ““Crime Fiction and the African Zeitgeist—A Brittle Paper Interview with Helon Habila on His Crime Writing Project (2013).” Interview Ainehi Edoro. *Brittle Paper*. Brittle

- Paper. 16 August 2013. Web. 11 November 2014.  
 <<http://brittlepaper.com/2013/08/crime-fiction-african-zeitgeista-brittle-paper-interview-helon-habila-crime-writing-project/>>.
- . "The African Short Story". *Untitled Books*. 50. December 2012. Untitled Books. 5 September 2011. Web. 5 June 2013.  
 <<http://untitledbooks.com/features/features/the-african-short-story-by-helon/>>.
- . *Measuring Time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007.
- . *Waiting for an Angel*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002.
- Hannan, Jim. "We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo." *World Literature Today*. 88.1 (2014): 55-56.
- Hensher, Philip. "Well, That's the End of the Booker Prize, Then." *The Guardian*. The Guardian. 18 September 2013. Web. 10 March 2014.  
 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/sep/18/booker-prize-us-writers-end>>.
- Haggard, H. Rider. *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). Random House, Inc.: New York, 2002.
- . *King Solomon's Mines*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- . *The Days of My Life*. Ed. C.J. Longman. London and New York: Longmans, Green and co., 1926.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Harrow, Kenneth. "The Old Chestnut of African Cultural Production" in *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa*, Ed. Augustine Agwuele. 121-131.
- Herman, David, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Routledge, 2005.
- Holden, Philip. "Modernity's Body: Kwame Nkrumah's *Ghana*." *Postcolonial Studies* 7.3 (2004): 313-332.
- Hollinger, David. *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.
- Holmberg, David Thomas. "'A Strange and Ecstatic Pleasure': The Voyeurism of the Naturalist's Gaze in Frank Norris's *Vandover* and *The Brute and McTeague*." *Studies in American Naturalism* 6.1 (2011): 49-68.
- Ibekwe, Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.

- Iduma, Emmanuel. "The Next Frontier for African Literature is African Publishing." *Think Africa Press*. Think Africa Press. 28 October 2013. Web. 10 March 2014.  
<<http://thinkafricapress.com/culture/blog/next-frontier-african-literature-african-publishing>>.
- Innes, C.L. *Achebe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Izebaye, Dan. "Chinua Achebe and the African Novel" in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Kalliney, Peter. *Commonwealth of Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Krishnan, Madhu. "Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 44. 1 (2013): 73-97.
- Kurtz, J. Roger. "The Intertextual Imagination in *Purple Hibiscus*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 42.2 (2011): 23-42.
- Larson, Charles. "Who Reads African Literature?" in *Palavers of African Literature: Essays in Honor of Bernth Lindfors*. Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 2002.
- Lopate, Philip. "Immigrant Fiction: Exploring An American Identity." *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of History*. np. nd. Web. 10 March 2014.  
<<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/literature-and-language-arts/essays/immigrant-fiction-exploring-american-identity>>
- Low, Gail. *Publishing the Postcolonial*. New York: Routledge, 2011
- Lowdon, Claire. "A Kind Of Loving." *New Statesman* 142.1566 (2013): 52-52.
- Magee, Max. "The Empire Writes Back." *The Millions*. 11 October 2006. Web. 21 March 2014.  
<<http://www.themillions.com/2006/10/empire-writes-back-by-garth-risk.html>>
- Marx, John. *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Mengiste, Maaza. *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010.
- Mengestu, Dinaw. *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.
- Mizruchi, Susan L. *The Rise of Multicultural America: Economy and Print Culture 1865-1915*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

- Moolla, Fiona F. *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel & the Idea of Home*. Suffolk: James Currey Publishers, 2014.
- Mwesigire, Bwesigye bwa. "Is Afropolitanism Africa's New Single Story: Reading Helon Habila's Review of *We Need New Names*." *This is Africa*. This is Africa. 29 October 2013. Web. 10 March 2014.  
<<http://archived.thisisafrica.me/opinion/detail/20042/is-afropolitanism-africa-s-new-single-story-reading-helon-habila-s-review-of-we-need-new-name>>
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Wizard of the Crow*. Trans. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.
- "Mazrui and Achebe." *Wasafiri* 28.3 (2013): 3-5.
- Nutsukpo, Margaret Fafa. "Feminist Stance and Language: A Focus on Beatrice in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*." *Achebe's Women: Imagism and Power*. Ed. Helen Chukwuma. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2012. 159-168.
- Nwakanma, Obi. "Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel." *Research in African Literatures* 39.2 (2008): 1-14.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. "Structure and Significance in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *English in Africa* 2.2 (1975): 39-44.
- Ogede, Ode S. Rev. of *Teaching the African Novel*, ed. Guarav Desai. *Research in African Literatures*. 41.3 (2010): 147-148.
- Ogot, Grace. *The Promised Land*. Nairobi, Kampala and Dar es Salaam: East African Educational Publishers, 1966.
- Ojwang, Dan and Michael Titlestad. "African Writing Blurs into 'World' Literature." *The Mail and Guardian*. 4 April 2014. Web. 9 November 2014. <<http://mg.co.za/article/2014-04-03-african-writing-blurs-into-world-literature/>>
- Okafor, Clement A. "Masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*" in *Masculinities in African Literary and Cultural Texts*. Eds. Helen Nabasuta Mugambi and Tuzyline Jita Allan. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010. 49-59.
- Okuyade, Ogaga. "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent: New Voices in the African Novel." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*. 44.1 (2013): 1-24.
- Olakunle, George. *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*. New York: State University of New York Press, c2003.

- Olaniyan, Tejumola. "Political Critique and Resistance in African Fiction." *Teaching the African Novel*, ed. Gaurav Desai. New York: Modern Language Association of America. 70-86.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. *The Columbia Guide to West African Literature in English Since 1945*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Oyeyemi, Helen. *The Icarus Girl*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.
- Perry, Menakhem. "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings [With an Analysis of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*]." *Poetics Today* 1.1/2 (1979): 35-64 and 311-361.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Prince, Gerald. *Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition). Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Pucherová, Dobrota. "'A Continent Learns to Tell its Story at Last': Notes on the Caine Prize." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48.1 (2011): 13-25.
- Quayson, Ato. "Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary" in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*. Eds. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013.
- Radziwill, Catherine. *Cecil Rhodes, Man and Empire-builder*. London: Cassell and Co., 1918.
- Reimers, A. J. *The Soul of the Person: A Contemporary Philosophical Psychology*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Retief, Glen. "Homoeroticism and the Failure of African Nationalism in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*." *Research in African Literatures* 40.3 (2009): 62-73.
- Riaz Ali and Anthony DiMaggio. "The Nation State, The Global Media and the Regime of Supervision" in *Discipline and Punish in Global Politics: Illusions of Control*. Ed. Janie Leatherman. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. 111-137.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Rowell, Charles Henry. "Listening to Chinua Achebe: A Memory." *Callaloo* 36.2 (2013): 226-231.
- Rubenstein, Michael. *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.
- Rudinow, Joel. *Sould Music: Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to Motown*. Ann Arbor,

- Michigan University Press, 2010.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Scaruffi, Piero. *A Brief History of Popular Music Before Rock Music*. California: Omniware, 2007.
- Serreda, Stefan. "Riffing on Resistance: Music in Chris Abani's *Graceland*." *ARIEL* 39.4 (2008): 31-47.
- Sherry, Vincent. *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Shih, Shu-Mei. "'Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition.'" *PMLA* 119.1
- Smith, Dinitia. "A Somali Author as Guide to a Dantean Inferno." *New York Times*. 19 May 2014. Web. 9 November 2014.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/19/books/19NURU.html>>
- Sternberg, Meir. "How Narrativity Makes a Difference." *Narrative*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2001): 115-122. (2014): 16-30.
- Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Strehle, Susan. "Producing Exile: Diasporic Vision in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 57.4. (2011): 650-672.
- Summerfield, Giovanna and Lisa Downward. *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.
- Sullivan, Joanna. "Redefining the Novel in Africa." *Research in African Literatures*. 37.4 (2006): 177-188.
- Teaching the African Novel*. Ed. Guarav Desai. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009.
- The Best American Short Stories*. Eds. Geraldine Brooks and Heidi Pitlor. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.
- Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa. "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: English is Not an African Language." *HARDtalk*. BBC. 22 July 2013. Television.
- "Mazrui and Achebe." *Wasafiri* 28.3 (2013): pp. 3-5.
- Thomas, Dominic. *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

- Turner, Daniel Cross. *Southern Crossings: Poetry, Memory and the Transcultural South*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2012.
- Tveit, Marta. "The Afropolitan Must Go." *Think Africa Press*. Think Africa Press. 5 November 2013. Web. 10 March 2014.
- Verschoye, F. *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches, 1881-1900*. London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1900.
- Vogel, Saskia. "'The West is Running Out of Stories,' Say Africans." *Publishing Perspectives*. Publishing Perspectives. 28 October 2014. Web. 21 November 2014. <<http://publishingperspectives.com/2014/10/west-running-stories/>>.
- Walter, Watson. *The Lost Second Book of Aristotle's Poetics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012.
- Warnica, Richard. "*Americanah* reminds us that every immigrant is an emigrant, too." *McLean's* 126.24 (2013).
- Weinstein, Jeremy M. *Inside Rebellion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Williams, Patrick. "Outlines of a Better World: Rerouting Postcolonialism" in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. Eds. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Wilson-Tagoe, Nana. "The African Novel and the Feminine Condition." *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. F. Abiola Irele. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 177-194.
- Wolf, Martin. *Why Globalization Works*. New Haven: Yale U. Press, 2004.
- Wood, Gaby. "Waterstones Eleven: interview with Taiye Selasi." *The Telegraph*. The Telegraph. 14 January 2013. Web. 10 March 2014. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9792918/Waterstones-Eleven-interview-with-Taiye-Selasi.html>>