EXILIC CONSCIOUSNESS STORIES AND CREATION OF NEW HOMES IN SEGUN AFOLABI'S *A LIFE ELSEWHERE*

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Abstract
This paper explores exile and exilic consciousness in Segun Afolabi's novel, A Life Elsewhere. Whereas the most common conception of exile relates to absence from one's homeland, that is, an erasure of one's physical presence from their native landscape, this essay delves deep to unravel the literary vision of Afolabi, submitting that his short stories offer other interpretative insights into the phenomenon of exile. The postcolonial trauma theory explains the sociological, political and economic dimensions of trauma as it affects the characters in the novel These stories reveal that exile transcends the physical state and extends to psychological displacement (loss, loneliness and disorientation) that does not necessarily imply physical absence from home. The paper also problematises the concept of home. It affirms that while home could be the physical territory where a character finds solace, it could also mean a state of mind which affords one the opportunity to create that which has been lost and which is impossible to experience in tangible terms.

Keywords: Exilic Consciousness, Migration, Absence, displacement, Territory

Introduction: the notion of exile and its interpretative modes
The trope of exile has been explored by many writers in various climes. Exile is a common literary trope in African writings. African writers like Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Dennis Brutus, Tanure Ojaide, and others, have extensively explored this phenomenon in their writings (Charles Bodunde, 2002; Adrian Koopman 2005; Senayon Olaoluwa, 2007; James Tar Tsaaior 2011; and Sayed Sadek, 2013). Moreover, apart from fictional creative works, authors, who have either directly or indirectly experienced certain incidents that prompted exilic consciousness have also explored this trope in their works.

Prompted by such issues as war, violence, famine, human rights abuses, political instability, economic and social deprivation, lack of opportunity, and the desire for greener pastures, exile is an age-long phenomenon. In religious and metaphysical conceptions, some people believe

that man is an exile on earth, living temporarily until he is called home through the agency of death (Gary Knoopers). The phenomenon of exile can be traced to biblical times when the Jews travelled from their homeland to Egypt and when they were later taken into captivity to Babylon. Apart from the Jews, many other tribes and nations have experienced similar dislocations from their homelands.

Writers and critics have discussed exile and exilic consciousness from different perspectives. Senayon Olaoluwa defines "exile as the result of the dislocation from one's native land... a human condition which is defined by dispersal or drift usually against the wish of an individual or community" (223). By this definition, Olaoluwa seems to restricts exile to only the physical plane, although he later speaks about the notions of internal and external exile. However, other scholars have taken this idea further by considering exile as more than a physical dislocation from one's homeland. For instance, Krist Shaw states that exile is no longer perceived as a banishment or expulsion from one's homeland but rather a condition commonly shares by a network of writers (24).

James Tar Tsaaior's perceptive interpretation of exile takes the concept above the physical dislocation from home:

> While exile could signify absence from one's homeland and hence register an erasure of physical presence from a particular landscape, other interpretive grids that negotiate exile refract it as a spiritual and psychological state that does not necessarily translate to physical absence from home. The essay contends that both modes of epistemology and hermeneutic insights are tenable. (98)

Corroborating this view, Sayed Sadek opines that "exile is not only a political condition signifying one's being forced away from one's homeland, but it also implies psychological displacement" (89). In addition, Charles Bodunde considers exile as "the sense of disorientation, displacement and misplacement, loss, loneliness and nostalgia for the homeland" (229). Both scholars, therefore, elevate exile above the displacement from a physical landscape, as it is also spiritual and psychological. The textual analysis corroborates these modes of interpretation of exile.

Writing on the exilic consciousness of Africans, Olaoluwa affirms and acknowledges the existence of what he calls internal and external exile (7). Whereas, those who are displaced outside their homeland (external exiles) are commonly acknowledged, those displaced within their own homeland

(internal exiles), without physical displacement, are prone to receive less attention. Olaoluwa views the latter as "spiritual exile which registers itself in terms of absence through presence" (100). In order words, such characters may be within the confines of their geographical setting, but due to some form of social, economic or political imbalance or privation, they are not "visible" to the powers that be in such society.

While discussing Micere Mugo's "My Mother's Poem and Other Songs", Olaoluwa describes Mugo's "My Mother's Poem" as an instance of what he called 'diaspora nationalism' that is, a condition in which individuals in the diaspora retain an attachment to homeland" (10). He further explains that:

> Mugo's strategy here, is to mobilize dramatic elements of dialogue, conflict, and resolution reinforce what should be the appropriate response to the tripartite notion of exile, home, and return because exilic experiences are not equal, as they differ from person to person and group to group. While the differences in exilic experience implicate the location of home and the personality of exiled individuals themselves, a number of other issues in the rendition of such discrimination are accounted for as well in the variables of race, class, religious and sectarian affiliations, and economic dynamics of the host nations (11).

Therefore, the experience in the foreign land, according to Olaoluwa, instigates a longing for home. According to him, "the discussion is laced with an aura of loss and mourning over a loved one. It additionally becomes an inventive way of responding to a personal condition of exile and the appropriate response relative to her specific condition" (11)

According to Njeri Githire, there are certain "processes and mechanisms through which displaced women 'place' themselves at home, in exile and abroad" (74). According to Marina Spunta, there continues to be a debate around the question of "place landscape, positing them as memory, contemplation, and imagination, highlighting the affective and relational experience of place, and voicing the postmodern condition of inhabiting displacement" (285).

There is no gainsaying that the personal experiences of writers often manifest in their creative works. Hence, the exilic consciousness in Afolabi's short stories could be traced to his own personal migratory experiences. Born in Kaduna, in the Northern part of Nigeria, Afolabi has lived in various places: his formative years were spent in the Congo, Japan, Canada, the then East Germany, and England. He had his education in Plateau State, from where he proceeded to Corona School in Lagos. He left Nigeria when he was barely ten, to England for further education. In England, he was educated at University College, Cardiff, where he graduated having completed his study in Management Studies. Afolabi's life is characterised by migratory experiences, as a son of a diplomat. This has stimulated his narrative which is located within the ambit of exilic consciousness and spatial temporariness. Everywhere, as we find in the short stories, becomes a home. Perhaps, the pictures of his life and those of others he witnessed in the Diaspora have been aptly demonstrated in this collection. Moreover, we easily identify tenets of postcolonialism such as postcolonial disillusionment, alienation, exile, hybridisation and double consciousness in the stories. From the foregoing, therefore, it is safe to assert that Afolabi is an exile in a sense. His stories are thus expressions of this assertion.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial thinkers who have reflected on literature and life in postcolonial environments have shifted concerns to traumatisation occasioned by the deformation of the psyche and individual imbalance caused by colonial legacies and immigration among other issues. Postcolonial trauma is a postcolonial theory which explains the effects of colonial traumas of those who experienced it during the postcolonial era. Sonya Andermahr opines that trauma is deeply rooted within diverse contexts and advised against discussing trauma as singular events. Rather, trauma encompasses different contexts, such as historical, geographical, cultural, discursive, social and psychological, which was elaborated by Norman Saadi Nikro. With respect to the study of trauma in postcolonial context, it seems more pressing when we consider how trauma embodies existential experiences and survival of copping in the aftermath of personal and social disintegration while disclosing the limits of narrative reference and representation (2).

It is from this perspective that I will engage Afolabi's *A Life Elsewhere*. It is of essence and great import to add here that in engaging post-colonial trauma for the proposed study, I will focus my attention on the sociological, political and economic dimensions of trauma as it affects the characters in the

novel. The circumstances surrounding the victims will be examined and a line will be drawn on whether the migrants as they are in this case are actually conscious of their exile experiences and alienation from home or whether they are comfortable with it.

Textual analysis of exilic consciousness in *A Life Elsewhere*

The over-riding theme of Afolabi's *A Life Elsewhere* is exile. Considered holistically, the stories in the collection thematically explore the realities of people who have to create new homes in their new worlds, those who left and never found home, and those who are displaced and became exiles in their own country. The common mission of these characters is the search for home in order to attain psychological stability and self-fulfilment.

In *A Life Elsewhere*, the definition of "home" becomes fluid as the face of exile varies. Afolabi keenly captures the impetus of leaving home and making a home elsewhere in "Monday Morning." This is the first story in the collection and it deals with physical displacement and exile. The story also captures the attempt of a family who find itself in a world where its aloneness is even more compounded by its inability to speak the language of their new environment. "Monday Morning" takes place in an unnamed location. However, by all indications, the family of four appears to have been forcefully thrust out of the safety of the life they had known all their lives, as a result of war in their homeland. However, it may be inferred from the names of the characters, Ernesto and Alfredo, that they are Latinos; and it appears that they have made their way to the West. Here, they are refugees who have to wait for "bureaucratic decision" that will legalise their stay in the country they have run to. Before the bureaucratic decision, they cannot truly start living.

However, we soon find that the father of Ernesto and Alfredo has always been an exile. His alienation transcends his displacement from his homeland through the crisis, "In his own country he had not been an expressive man... People often thought he was mute or he was from another country or his mind was dull. But all of that did not matter; he had learned to cook and he had discovered the love of a woman who did not need him to be someone he was not" (7). For him, home is his beloved wife, not any spatial enclosure. He would do everything to find comfort in her. Therefore, he finds himself distraught when the woman in whom he has found home and a sense of belonging is angry at him for risking deportation to provide for them.

In their displacement, the family of Ernesto has to wait in the hostel, Excelsior, for "life to begin." Excelsior, as the mother observes, "was not a place to become used to" (5). In dealing with the aloneness of the new world

where they find themselves, the different personalities of each member of the family are revealed in the dreams they have at night. At night, the father dreams that he is in his old kitchen with the heat, flies and the squawks of chickens outside. The mother flies to the beach on their coast and notices how the moonlight glints off the waves. Ernesto dreams of his school friends before they were forced to scatter, and the fighting began. Only Alfredo remains in the new country in his sleep; he is in the glass hotel, in his own room (8). While others struggle to make their new environment a home, Alfredo's soul truly lives in the new land.

> He did not worry about the woman or his mother and father or when he should return to the hostel. He was too tired for any of that. The boy slept. Again, he did not have bad dreams. He did not dream of his own country. He saw the green grass in the park that Sunday afternoon, his mother's five fingers searching for his face, his father and brother, even the angry friend, Emmanuel, sitting on the bed in the hotel room, looking for the face of God" (15).

Alfredo has the temperament suited for building a life elsewhere. He escapes the anger in the hostel room they share to visit the glass hostel. Alfredo's personality is one that can attach all entanglements to the past. He is secure in his new environment.

The short story "People You Don't Know" explores a similar form of alienation. Like the boys' father in "Monday Morning", Leon has been alone. He is displaced in life. Leon, by an arrangement, has to live with his brother, Bryant, whom he despises so much. His floundering around clumsily is symbolised by his malapropism. He says "dextrose" (34) when he means "dexterous, deviant" (37) when he means "devious." He does not even come close to making himself understood when he misuses "effervescent" and "munificent" (38).

His attempt to find himself is symbolically engaged through the journey motif. Unable to find his bearing, he develops a knack for stealing cars. When he is disconsolate at the cleaning job his brother, Bryant, puts him up to, he steals a car and ponders: "I want to be moving fast, to feel the wind capture this humidity. There need not be a destination... I drive in a direction I've never been before...." (30-31). The journey, which leads him towards a destination he had never been before, mirrors his physical sense of not belonging. Similarly, he breaks into a mud-red Chrysler and reminisces on the experience: "How I travelled from town to town in the leather-comfort of it,

not getting out of the air-conditioning, even at the beach" (32). At the end of the story, he needs Stella's suggestions. For him, finding himself does not lie in a journey of moving forward but in a journey of moving backward. Here, he differs from Alfredo, whose answer lies in going forward. As Stella suggests to him, "You could catch the next flight back and start again" (26). This is exactly what he did.

A Life Elsewhere is particularly striking in its disruption of the notion of "home." For Afolabi, home does not bear a fixed definition. Home could be a feeling or a place. For Salman Rushdie who writes on the dilemma of exiles in their quest to locate home, the reclamation of the real home is impossible (10). Thus, the exile should create a homeland of the mind, an imaginary locale which will approximate the real. It is possible for home not to be home, as explored in "Something in the Water". While there are those who pine for physical and spiritual homes from where they had been displaced in other stories, Femi returns home, his country, with his foreign wife, Marcia. However, for him, home has ceased to be home. While Marcia is enthusiastic to visit her husband's home, Femi is reluctant to leave the aeroplane. He has no nostalgia about the home he is visiting. His description of the scene of arrival is devoid of cheerfulness: "There was nothing to see, really, only dry land... Trees. Just trees" (167). He looks on his country like an uninterested outsider. When Marcia enthuses about home, he wonders: "Home? He didn't know quite what she meant. The place you loved; that you returned to; somewhere that drew you back again?" (172). For Femi, unlike other characters who long to return to their native homes, his native land is not a place that catches his interest. Ruminating about his homeland, he laments: "God isn't here... and then he wept, hard and bitterly, crouching down to the soil" (180). In his home country, he is angry, suspicious and afraid. The only home he knows is in the arms of his American wife, in America.

Home, for Kayode, the old wine guitarist, in "The Wine Guitar," is not a place. It is his youth and family. Kayode is an old man seeking youthful elixir in the arms of a prostitute. In his youth, he was a singer who had performed in the "front of audiences of hundreds" (42). However, at the time of the narrative, he is an old man who has stopped singing because of his thin and cracked voice. Besides trying to recapture his youth through the body of a prostitute, he looks for home in the food of his youth in Mama Yinka's restaurant:

> But he found himself drawn there despite the shabbiness, despite Mama Yinka's squawking and the irritating tapes. He

> found he could not help himself; the foods he had learned to taste no longer gave him pleasure. He who had once tasted every single dish on the menu in an Indian restaurant. Or his long affair with Mexican food, with Italian and Thai, his family's obsession with *dim sum.* The hunger now was for the food of his youth, all sophistication and learned habits washed away. He could eat only *akara* and bitter-leaf stew, *eba* and *egusi*, the *okro* soup his mother had made (44).

In their old age, which they spend in their new land, Kayode and Salbatore "were afraid, secretly, of what others thought of them – two old men – the bar staff, the musicians, the young ones who drifted through the door. Sometimes, they heard laughter at their retreating forms" (48). As an old man, he looks back to the land of his childhood and his homelessness. His displacement is engaged through the journey motif:

> ...his wife had returned to the place where they had both been born; he had not followed her even though she had asked him. He felt he had been too long now in another man's country; he had forgotten so much about himself, about the past. He was too stubborn and sometimes it seemed to him he had tried at life and failed, or had been carried along a road whose destination was not his own (51)

Perhaps, most telling is the journey home by Salbatore and Kayode from the bar. On their journey back, Kayode watches "Salbatore struggle to find a place as the bus moved away; the young ones were reluctant to give up their seats... he stamped his feet on the pavement, against the cold" (52). Salbatore's struggle symbolises the story of displacement; the inability of the old to find a place in a world where youth is ultimate. Kayode ponders at this: "It was not so easy to be alone and old, to look back at one's life and taste disappointment" (52). He is struck by the desire to make a connection: "He thought he would write or phone or visit one of his children. Probably a letter. He would try to make a connection" (53).

In "Arithmetic," Afolabi further uses the journey motif to interrogate the protagonist's attempts to come to terms with his life. The story takes place in a carriage. The carriage moves on as Mr Ajayi looks back on his life. He is married to a Spanish woman who has always been lively until the death of their child. Mr Ajayi is caught in a land of guilt. Yet, all he seeks is to find a house where he could feel at home, but he gets guilt for his troubles.

Guilt is metaphorically interpreted as a country in "The Visitor." Like Mr Ajayi, Lorna and her husband are banished to the land of grief; they have sentenced themselves to a life of childlessness for unwittingly killing a child in an accident. Despite Irene's consolation, "It was nobody's fault. That is what I'm trying to tell you, the child's running into the road, maybe. But it couldn't be helped. Don't you see?" (91) Lorna and her husband cannot help feeling guilty because they had been drunk when the accident occurred. If living may be likened to driving, in their living, they had cut another life short. Following this, they are stuck in the land of guilt, refusing procreation. For them, home is guilt.

A Life Elsewhere is preoccupied with the different perspectives from which the story of home and homelessness may be told. While Afolabi considers the story of those who leave their home to travel abroad, he also does not fail to consider the stories of those who are left behind and those who are forever banished to be on the fringe: to be citizens of other countries that may never be visited. For these people, home is always a step away and they become the Ooststrooms of their worlds, even without travelling, like the boys' father in "Monday Morning". The figure of Ooststroom derives from "Two Sisters". Ooststroom does not tell his story. Rather, his story is narrated for him by the child who makes assumptions for him. The child-narrator comes to know the face of Mr Ooststroom to be the face of every lone traveller, who speaks a different language in a new world, and who has to make a life elsewhere. Ooststroom is a native Dutchman who has had to make a new life in the United Kingdom. The mother, a Yoruba woman who has successfully made the transition to being the citizen of a new world, possibly recognises herself in the struggle of Oost to belong. Therefore, she reaches out to him but the children, who have never been Ooststrooms in worlds where they are suspected for being different; resent him for receiving their mother's attention.

The protagonist of "Moses" is similar to the protagonist in "The Husband of your Wife's Best Friend". He belongs to those who have been left behind. He has a dead child. He is trapped by guilt and the failure to successfully create a new world. Since he works in a photo lab, his lies in looking at other people's pictures and getting lost in the lies the photo tells: the afternoon would hurtle by as he gazes at pictures of people enjoying themselves. It is a kind of lie, these moments of bliss, as if entire lives consisted of parties and holidays and grinning "cheese," beaming at one another. He knows this, but still, he would lose himself in the fantasy of other people's happiness.

> He has failed in his bid to create a life elsewhere:
> He came from a part of the world where you might be fed if you knocked on a stranger's door, but it was not unknown to witness a corpse by the side of the road or a child begging for its blind father. He had moved away from that. He had managed to shape a life elsewhere: a man, a woman and a child. Now the child was dead and the woman had left him. He had lost his job and then his house. It was as if he were starting all over again: the current job, the flat, the woman who lived there. Everything is temporary for him (135).

In "Now That I'm Back", Louis looks for answers in life after being left behind. Louis and his mother belong to the country of those who have been left behind. They have been abandoned by their father who was a victim of an accident that cost him his limbs. His mother had attempted to find a new home and she finds it in Jesus: "Papa left; she embraces Jesus..." (146). For Louis, his confinement to a wheel chair banishes him to a solitary world. His lamentation presents him as the invisible stranger in the world of the able bodies: "Mrs Ambrose swivels around and smiles. I could be thirteen for all she knows, or ninety-three. She sees me, but doesn't see, if you know what I mean. I'm not whole, complete to her" (144). Disability makes Louis the citizen of another country.

The nameless protagonist in "The Husband of Your Wife's Best Friend" has to look back on who he was when he arrived in a new land and what he has become. Knowing how much he has changed in this new land does fill him with a sense of guilt most times: "I secure a seat on the Tube. This involves a tussle with a woman who appears from nowhere, but I'm fast and burly, and have misplaced any sense of decorum. I am enthroned in my seat in the carriage, the victor... Sometimes I shudder when I think of my behaviour" (112). For a living, he guides planes. He does not feel secure in his job; his boss has been full of compliments for him, yet he casts suspicious looks over his shoulders. He is married but he is alienated from his wife. He creates an imaginary home for himself in his sexual fantasies. Home, for him, is escape from the turbulence of his realities into the arms of the imaginary fantasias.

Afolabi's *A Life Elsewhere* problematises the idea of home and how home may be viewed. He tells the story of home from varying perspectives and views the reality of existence through the lens that insistently examines the world using the journey motif. As has been stated, stories are presented

from windows of buses, minds travelling backwards to their past, while their owners' journey forward in trains, buses and planes. Afolabi captures the universality of displacement and aloneness, while averring that home could be a place, a state of mind or a feeling.

Conclusion

A Life Elsewhere focuses on people who have left the familiarity of their native homes to create lives elsewhere. These people know the pain of leaving the comfort of home to grapple with the upheavals of relocating and the fortune and misfortune of their recipient countries. Afolabi does not mention locations in majority of the stories. This enables him to attain a sense of universality. The overriding themes of Afolabi's *A Life Elsewhere* exile are displacement and the various faces they can wear. The stories explore the realities of people who have to create new homes in their new worlds.

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