

‘STUCK BETWEEN TWO WORLDS’: TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND MOBILITY
IN DINAW MENGESTU’S *THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS*

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Abstract

The contemporary African fiction is awash with the theme of migration and the myriad of factors such as unemployment, socio-economic dislocation, war, political oppression and many other factors that continue to fuel migratory tendency among many Africans. Many of these novels do not only grapple with the notion of African migrants fleeing to the West but also capture their experiences as they try to settle in the new society far away from their home country in Africa. DinawMengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is one such novel that offers insight into the factors pushing Africans to the West. The paper explores some of the reasons why many African migrants are moving to what they consider more habitable environments in Europe and the United States. Mengestu’s novel equally highlights the realities of life for African migrants in the United States. The paper focuses on how postcolonial issues such as otherness, marginality and liminality constitute a barrier or limit the ability of the migrant in realizing his or her aspirations in the United State and other Western countries. The paper employs postcolonial theory and Sigmund Freud’s concept of melancholia to examine Mengestu’s novel. This paper concludes that based on the experiences of the characters in Mengestu’s novel, migration to the West is not necessarily a way out of poverty for African migrants.

Keywords: Migration, mobility, liminality, conviviality, otherness, melancholia.

Introduction

African writers at various times have employed the vehicle of literature to project the everyday realities of the people. The novel, more than any other form of literature has been deployed to capture the experiences and aspirations of African people during and after the colonial period. Away from the receded the twentieth century, Charles Nnolim (2010) challenged African writers to turn their creative energy to the twenty-first century and explore new humanism that was different from that of the previous century. According to Nnolim:

What prevents the African writers in the twenty-first from re-inventing Europe and from there develop an international theme in our literature. The Europeans wrote about Africa after a mere trip (Conrad), or domiciling there for a few years (Elspeth Huxley), why can’t Africans write about Europe or America? We have travelled to Europe and America, worked there, studied there, married their women, and lived there. Are we so unperceptive not to observe, so blind not to see, so analphabetic not to write about them or about us in their midst? (236)

The study is essentially about an African writer who took up the challenge of Nnolim to write “about us in their midst” and in so doing, shifted his literary lens away from the usual thematic preoccupation of the writers of Achebe’s era. Mukoma wa Ngugi (2020) notes this shift in theme from the “literature of decolonization to the transnational literature being produced by younger African writers like NoViolet Bulawayo and Chimamanda Adichie” (9). Ayodeji Shittu (2016) equally observes that what defines the works of these writers is their engagement with the themes of migration, trans-nationalism and the attendant issues of integration, identity, hybridity and the survival strategies of the migrant character in multiracial society.

In the fourth chapter of his 1972 study of V.S. Naipaul's writing, Paul Theroux (1972) chose to focus on the theme of travelers in Naipaul's work, in which category we may include migrants, refugees and the asylum seekers. Theroux wrote of them thus, "(t)hey cannot settle, they are constantly moving in a sense they never arrive and much of their travel is flight. Rootlessness is their condition: it is the opposite of those for whom being metropolitan is a condition" (77).

In contemporary African writing, a cohort of writers has emerged, who are not strictly Naipaul's literary heirs but who share with him the concern for the lives of migrants, the exiled, the refugees and the asylum seekers. This study examines the transnational migration and the purgatorial experiences of the characters in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. The fate of the migrant character has been a major issue in the novels of many African writers in recent times. Dominic Thomas (2011) observes that in African literature,

Today, there exist a wide range of works by authors from both north and south of the Sahara (and from numerous other geographical locations) addressing postcolonial circumstances, exhibiting a particular concern with the plight of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. (143)

The observation of Thomas is indeed apt as many novels have been written by novelist of African descent depicting the predicament of fictional African migrants, exiles, and refugees as they grapple with living outside their home country and the disabling barriers that prevent them from fully accessing the benefit of the host country.

Also, Alain Mabanckov in a 2011 paper alluded to the "fierce determination of the protagonist of contemporary African novels to leave the places of their birth and go in search of another life" (78). This paper seeks to explore what happens when that "fierce determination" collides with the hard facts of life as an African migrant in Europe or in the United States.

Transnational Migration and Mobility in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears or *Children of the Revolution*, as the British edition reads, is the debut novel by the Ethiopian novelist, Dinaw Mengestu, published in 2007. It is a remarkable novel that recounts the tale of an Ethiopian shopkeeper, Sepha Stephanos, who flees Ethiopia to the United States during the period of the violent purging of political dissidents known as the Red Terror in the 1970s. Sepha's father is taken away and apparently killed after the Red Terror soldiers invaded their house in search of subversive materials.

Sepha, due to the insistence of his mother, leaves Ethiopia through the desert on his way to the United States as the soldiers of the Red Terror regime are bent on eliminating all those they consider to be enemies of the state. Sepha fleeing to the United States is not necessarily driven by the quest for a better opportunity but essentially to keep himself alive. His migration is therefore a forced or involuntary one necessitated by the troubling violent socio-political situation in his country. He runs for his life just like his uncle Berhane to avoid being killed. Sepha's migration from Ethiopia departs from the usual narrative that African migrants usually move to the West essentially for economic reason.

Sepha's Ethiopia just like the countries of his friends, Kenneth from Kenya and Joseph from Congo, is politically and socially uninhabitable thus seeking refuge far away from home becomes the right thing to do and this buttresses James Arnett's (2016) position that "displacement would not need to occur – would not happen nearly so often – if the places from which migrants and refugees flee were sustaining and supportive" (103). Arnett writes about Sepha and his two friends that "(w)hatever the particulars of their departures from Africa and each does have a suitably violent origin story that

bespeaks refugeeism and displacement, as opposed to voluntary emigration – these three are united in their shared orphanhood” (117). This ‘shared orphanhood’ is the fate of many migrants that move from their home country because it is not supportive of their aspirations and they often find the adopted country unfriendly as the migrants are usually designated as the *other*.

The United States is often perceived by migrants as a country where the dream of a better life can be realized. Sepha recollects the dreams he shared with his two friends when he arrived newly in the United States about the possibility of achieving whatever they set their mind to achieve. At that time, to him and his friends, America was there for them to conquer after he quit his job at the Capitol Hotels because he couldn’t come to terms that his father had died for him to be “spared in order to carry luggage in and out of a room” (142). He felt just like his friends, that they were cut out for something better than carrying luggage rather they should be in a position where someone will carry their luggage up the stairs. Sepha remembers that he and his friends “were all guilty of hyper inflated optimism and irrational hope at that point” (143). When African migrants leave their homeland, they are usually propelled by the illusion of a better life in a Western country.

Sepha nursed the dream of making it big as a shopkeeper when he started the business, “I spent two thousand dollars of borrowed money on it with the idea that perhaps my store could become a deli, and in becoming a deli, a restaurant, and in becoming a restaurant, a place that I could sit back and look upon proudly” (3). Sepha’s friends also nursed their own dreams too; Joseph’s plan was to get a doctorate degree from University of Michigan and for Kenneth to become an engineer.

But as they settled in the land of dreams, they began to realize that things are not exactly as they envisaged it would be. Sepha and his friends just like Oby Okolocha (2016) notes of the characters in Chmamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Pede Hollist’s *So the Path Does not Die* “are cured of false impressions of America; their eyes are now open to the reality of being black in America, and they recognize the difference between their illusions and reality” (160). Migrants especially those from Africa find it difficult to integrate into many societies in the West because of what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) refers to as the “articulation of difference” between the black immigrants and the citizens of the host community. Kenneth for example is able to actualize his dream of becoming an engineer but because of his race, he is not accorded his proper place in his place of work and this affects the way he sees himself as Sepha observes that he is an “engineer who tries not to look like one.” (2)

Kenneth is keenly aware that as a result of his skin colour, he is denied the socio-economic mobility that his white colleagues enjoy. This may account for why he tries not to look like an engineer because his economic status does not reflect that he is one unlike his white colleagues. It dawns on Kenneth just like many immigrant as Aliko Varvogli (2017) opines that in America, the “reality for the nation’s others is one of poverty, exclusion and lack of opportunity” (247) and this is due largely to the marginality of the immigrants as they are denied full access to the resources of the host country. This perception of the other as incapable of possessing the required economic capital to acquire anything meaningful is highlighted when Sepha goes with Kenneth to get a car. The scene at the used-car dealership is poignant in the sense that it illustrates how the inherent worth of Sepha and Kenneth is not recognized because they are black people.

The non-verbal response of the white men at the dealership to Sepha and Kenneth shows clearly the concept of *otherness* which is how the dominant group considers the unfamiliarity of another group within that given society. The two black men are considered not worthy of more than a cursory recognition. Kenneth understands at this point that no matter his talent or capability, he will always be seen as the *other* and therefore, excluded from fully realizing his potentials.

This affects him psychologically and it invariably leads to his disillusionment. He abandons his initial grand notions of the United States as a country where dreams are realized no matter the colour, religion and gender of the dreamer. Sepha paints a pathetic and disturbing portrait of Kenneth when he visits him at home, sitting on a plastic lawn chair “frozen and lifeless” (145). Kenneth clearly

suffers a Freudian kind of melancholia that emanates from loss of self-esteem and it manifests both in a psychological and physical way as his appearance later on shows that of a man finally in tune with reality as Sepha sadly observes that “he was tired. His shoulders were hunched just slightly. His eyes had a weariness and vacancy to them that reminded me of the look you sometimes see on an injured child who has just caught a glimpse of something cruel and unfair happening to someone he loves” (181-2).

Joseph believes getting a PhD is a simple thing to do until the realities of life as migrant cures him of that illusion. It finally dawns on him that “Michigan and the PhD are now the idle dreams of a restless young immigrant” (169). Joseph and Kenneth are unable to experience social and economic mobility as a result of the marginal space they find themselves in a society that designates them as the other.

Sepha is uprooted from his home country as a result of persecution and so he does not initially nurse the grand dreams like his friends, Kenneth and Joseph. He is clearly a reluctant migrant forced to flee his country because of the brutal killing of his father and the fear that the same fate awaits him if he does not leave the country. Sepha’s predicament in Ethiopia reflects what Bill Ashcroft (2009) describes as the “melancholic plight of people who must move across borders, must in fact *flee* the nation either as economic or political refugees, or as subjects oppressed in some way by state power” (13). He seems to have been yanked off from his homeland and dumped in the US against his will. His actions and words are those of an individual who never really left his homeland and also, of someone who is never really at home in the host country. Sepha fits into Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the immigrant living in the state of in-betweenness, neither here nor there as he hovers between two spaces, that of the homeland and equally, that of the host country. The scene where Uncle Berhane lectures Sepha when he newly arrived about what he should expect to find in America, succinctly captures his ambivalent state of mind.

I don’t know if he saw in me a flicker of ambition or desire, but he need not have worried. I didn’t want anything from America. In those days I believed it was only a matter of weeks or months before I returned home to Ethiopia. I spent all my energy and free time planning for that. How was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia? I wasn’t, I decided. I wasn’t supposed to live here at all. (140)

Sepha occupies a liminal space where he is neither regressing nor progressing but he seems just like his two friends to be frozen in between fleeing Ethiopia and arriving in the United States. His words depict his stagnant state in America, “It seems as if time stands completely still at the close of each day, and is resumed only by my return. Sometimes I like to think that if I waited ten or twenty years before opening my store, I could return to find it completely unchanged” (17). His immobility is spurred by grief as a result of his loss of country and family as he confesses, “Left alone behind the counter, I was hit with sudden terrible and frightening realization that everything I had cared for and loved was either lost or living on without me” (40). The death of his father haunts him deeply because he feels he died due to his involvement with the students’ revolutionary activities. He is unable to forgive himself and unable to let go of the past. He is unable to let go of the ugly incident that happened to his family shortly before he fled Ethiopia and so rebuilding his life in America continues to hang in the balance. His predicament fits the concept of ‘unhomeliness’ which is driven according to Bhabha by “the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunts the historical present” (18). It is a Freudian concept that Bhabha used to examine the colonial and postcolonial experience of displaced people.

Sepha’s inability to break free from the past that continuously haunts his present after seventeen years in America tends to impede his progress and his ability to integrate in America. He is in a state that Abdelmalek Sayad (2009) refers to as ‘double absence’ in which migrant is physically absent from his or her home country and also not an active participant in the activities of the host country. Sepha is

physically absent from Ethiopia but emotionally connected through memory and he is physically present in America but psychologically absent as he is more an observer rather a participant in the events around him and due to this conflict within him, Hatice Bay's (2018) assertion about him is right when she alludes to the fact that "Sepha cannot experience the 'present' fully in the present" (83). He exists in an exilic situation that Edward Said (1996) describes as a "median state, neither completely at one with the new setting not fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvement and half detachment" (49). So his lack of meaningful progress in all he sets out to do stem not really from institutional and immigration barriers but because he is, as Madelaine Hron (2009) argues is the state of many migrants, "trapped in a liminal locus of inertia" (26). Sepha's seemingly disposition to linger within the liminal space accounts largely for his lack of socio-economic mobility in the United States.

The protagonist of *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* is more of a clog in his own wheel of progress because he refuses to exit the liminal space. The exile according to Said (2001) continues with "habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally" (186). So there are two conflicting sense of self battling within him and he is uncertain of the path to take. He tends to move in circles and the narrative structure reflects this aspect of him. Sepha's inability to come to terms with the loss of his father, the abandonment of his mother and his younger brother in Ethiopia in many ways, account for his liminal state which contributes to the rupturing of his sense of self to the point that he becomes melancholic.

In Freud's discourse on melancholia, he asserts that it as a form of unresolved grief which leaves the individual filled with self-reproach and the idea of being worthless. Some of the features of melancholia that Freud outlines are "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity" (244) and the individual's perception of himself or herself "as worthless, incapable of any achievement" (246). Sepha in many ways exhibits these features of melancholia and it foregrounds his inability to let go of the past and his socio-economic immobility in America. His melancholic condition is reflected in the static and sparse state of his apartment, his apparent lack of progress in the seventeen years he has been in America, his lack of desire to participate in the activity of the black community in Logan Circle where he lives or even in the Ethiopian diasporan community of the building where his uncle Berhane lives and lastly, his reluctance to get involved in a relationship with a woman. He continues to fluctuate between two worlds until he establishes relationship with a white educated woman, Judith and her intelligent daughter, Naomi.

Freud writes that a person can be cured of melancholia after a considerable amount of time or when the individual replaces the object of his or her obsession. In the case of Sepha, the affection for Judith and the idea of starting a new family is what momentarily cures him of his melancholia and not the passage of a lengthy period of time. He seems to be getting along well with Judith and her biracial daughter until his apparent lack of will to take a decision again, ruptures the relationship. His inability to reconcile his liminal state rather than the racial difference is the bane of his entanglement with Judith. Judith captures Paul Gilroy's (2004) concept of conviviality which is an ideal that encourages multicultural cohabitation and interaction in postcolonial cities around the world. Judith imbibes this ideal as she harbours no resentment towards Sepha. The relationship fails to progress but rather remains stagnant as with everything about Sepha's life in America due to his inability to take a stand.

In fact, the novel's non-chronological and cyclical structure mirrors Sepha's disjointed, insouciance and uncoordinated life since he arrived in America. He keeps inhibiting his progress by his passivity which arises from his lack of motivation to make sense of his life in his adopted country. His situation calls up Said (1978) take on the orientals entering the life of the West and yet retaining some organic ties with the place they originally came from and he concludes that the dilemma "is very much a procedure of crossing, rather than maintaining, barriers" (336-7) and this aptly captures Sepha's

predicament in America. He is stuck between returning to Ethiopia and remaining in America. His socio-economic immobility is tied to the resolution of the three-dimensional issues of the sense of self, place and even that of time that he seems to constantly have to contend with.

Close to the end of the novel, Sepha realizes that clinging to the past is hampering his progress. He has been afflicted too long with the migrant's condition that Sayad refers to as the "double absence" and for him to make meaning of his life, he must put a stop to his fluctuating sense of self, time and place. His ambivalent disposition is why he is disenchanted with the realities of things in America. Freud points out that melancholia is not just borne out of the loss of a love interest or object but also can arise from the loss of belief and this is true of Sepha. He seems to lack confidence in his entrepreneurial skill neither does he believe someone like Judith, a wealthy and highly educated white woman, can truly fall in love with him. He suffers from low self-esteem and this is seen in the way he runs his store and in his interaction with Judith.

He finally decides to break with the past and in so doing, exit the space of double absence. For the many years in Logan Circle, Sepha never really considers himself part of the community but close to the end of the novel, he becomes aware that "There's a safety in numbers that goes beyond my home. I've learned this only recently" (226). It is indeed a marked departure from when he occupies the space of "the passive and helpless observation of people stuck living on the sidelines" (23). He seems to be done with stumbling blindly from one place to another. In crossing the barrier of indecision, he resolves to move his stagnant life forward.

Exilic migrants in many cases hardly make it back to their original homeland after the event that necessitated their departure as Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo (2016) assert that "The assumption behind the 'been-to' is that s/he always intended to return to Africa. However, in the case of the exile who leaves their country of origin, not for education or employment, but to escape political oppression, this is not necessarily the case; there may be no way back" (4). This assertion rings true of the case of Sepha in *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* when he declares that he has "left home for good" (177) and this understanding is as a result of his regaining his sense of self, place and time. It is a different Sepha who notes that, "A bird stuck between two branches gets bitten on both wings. I would like to add my own saying to the list now, Father: a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough" (228). There is a sense here that he is ready to let go of the past and get his life together in America.

Conclusion

Sepha's socio-economic immobility is largely because he is stuck between worlds, a double absence situation that renders him unable to decide what he really wants while for Kenneth and Josph, their marginal position as the *others* in the American physical space denies them full access to the resources of their host society. They are denied access to the beautiful things that America can offer as a result of their marginal position. The title of the novel is an extract from Dante's *Inferno*, where he emerges from hell and gets a glimpse of Heaven:

Through a round aperture I saw appear
Some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears
Where we came fourth, and once more saw the stars. (99)

Sephas and his friends on the other hand emerge from the hell in Africa and they hope to access the beautiful things that America, a kind of heaven, can offer them but with time they come to the realization that America equally has its own sort of hell and this knowledge is the cause of their disillusionment. They come to realize that America indeed offers beautiful things but it is not open to everyone especially if the individuals are among the nation's *other* who are often times, relegated to the margin of the host society.

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