
Diaspora and Hybrid Identities in Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*

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Abstract

People are different from one another; but the one thing that links us all together is that we all have culture. Besides, we cannot talk about culture without people. Culture has inherent values and systems peculiar to it. Different societies and places manifest different cultures, and since people usually move from place to place, they get in contact with other cultures of other countries or places. If they do so, they get to know other values and cultural systems and might adopt a characteristic of another culture. This experience is called diaspora and these people probably establish hybrid identities. Diaspora and hybridity are central topics in Emeka Nwabueze's 'Echoes of Madness', which was first staged in 1993. Obiora Nnazodie, the main character, is an African, who has lived in America for fifteen years. He moves back to Africa again and faces another culture shock. This paper looks at hybrid identity in relation to Obiora Nnazodie. The objective is to understand that specific diasporic experience so that governments of the world would have understanding of such experiences for policy making. The method is qualitative.

Keywords: Culture, Inherent values and systems, Hybrid identities, Diaspora, People

Introduction

There are many different definitions of the term *diaspora*. According to Braziel and Mannur (2003) diaspora derives from the Greek word 'diasperien' and can be divided into 'dia' which means 'across' and 'sperien' which means 'to sow or scatter seeds'. In other words, diaspora is a term describing "people who have been dislocated from their native homelands through the movements of migration, immigration or exile" (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 1). The term *diaspora* was originally used as a description of the exceptional situation of the Jews. In the last 25 years, however, the term has been extended to other groups (Charim & Borea, 2012, p. 19). The Black African diaspora, for example, started in the "sixteenth century with the slave trade, forcibly exporting West Africans out of their native lands and dispersing them into the "New World" which are parts of "North America, South America, the Caribbean and elsewhere that slave labor was exploited" (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 2).

The term *diaspora* has once been conceptualized as an exilic or nostalgic dislocation from homeland but has been increasingly used to describe the mass migration and displacements in the second half of the twentieth century (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 4). Moreover, Braziel and Mannur (2003) point out that diaspora entails a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it "denotes communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion" (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 4), which is connoted negatively. On the other hand, more positively, diaspora also means the "fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds" (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 4). Hall (2001) also defines diaspora in a positive way by claiming that diaspora experience resembles the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity. Furthermore, he points

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out that identity lives in and through difference and that diaspora experience is defined by hybridity (p.5).

In contrast to the original definition by Charim and Borea, diaspora does not only take specific groups into account but also sees diaspora as a process indicating general ideas which may be applied to different groups (Kalra et al., 2015, p. 29). In other words, diaspora includes ideas about belonging, place and the way people live.

Although there are many definitions of diaspora, yet there are four main constitutive characteristics in most of the definitions. The first characteristic is dispersion. Generally, people do not want to leave their native land, but have to leave because there is a violent or traumatic form of displacement. The second characteristic is continuity which means that there is a collective identity over many generations. This means that children and grandchildren are still able to identify themselves with the country of origin of their parents or grandparents. The third characteristic deals with the feeling of belonging and solidarity among other people who have been dispersed and this is called transversal community. They feel they belong to each other although they do not live in the same place because they have the same memories of their displacement. The last characteristic refers to the fact that diaspora is not only an evocation of the past but also a projection of the future, which means that members of diaspora feel responsible to release, develop or sometimes even return to their homeland (Bauböck in Charim and Borea, 2012, p.1).

Members of the diaspora often experience two or more cultures. This phenomenon is called hybridity, which is defined by Hein (2006) as a mixture of cultures and as a negotiation process

between cultural differences (p. 433). There are not only differences between different cultures but also within one culture because every culture is generally hybrid as every culture is the product of a mixture (Hein, 2006, p. 434). As such, Hein (2006) claims that hybrid identities are identities which are developed by contact, similarities and differences of various cultural contexts (p. 434). Hein (2006) also points out that there is homogenous and heterogeneous mixture. If the mixture of two different products become a third product then it is a homogenous mixture; if the two products do not combine and therefore do not become one uniform product as the homogeneous one, then, it is defined as heterogeneous.

Cultural hybridity is a heterogeneous mixture as it is a mixture of complex and combined systems. Hybridity is established on the basis of difference and identities are developed by interaction between different social and cultural conditions, (Hein, 2006, p. 435). Furthermore, Hein points out that cultural identities fall back on socially accumulated knowledge about 'Us' and 'The Others'. Discourses about *Us* and *The Others* provide an orientation regarding social relationships. Hybrid cultural identities are defined by two or more established cultural parts of identities, which are in constant mutual dialogue, according to Hein (2006, p. 436). Hybridity does not necessarily mean the dissolution of a distinct identity; it is instead the ability to adapt to different identity opportunities. Such adaptability is mobility; for if there is no movement, there is no negotiation between differences; therefore, it is not cultural hybridity. In other words, there is no hybridity if there is no cultural confrontation or contact (Hein, 2006, p. 436). From Hein's (2006) perspective hybrid identities strive to end the constant movement between different identity positions. They strive for a definite belonging and an end of cultural differences. These dreams,

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however, are not going to become true as there will always be an endless movement between cultures and locations (p. 439). Besides, an individual can feel a sense of belonging to more than one nation, which is based on different tiers of belonging such as citizenship, descent or cultural socialisation. This may occasion hybridity in identities, and hybrid identities can be linked to several national identity contexts; however, these relationships are not consummate. These experiences are evident in Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*.

Echoes of Madness: A Brief Overview

Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness* was first staged on February 24, 1993, at the University of Nigeria. It is about American and African cultures and the conflict between them. It consists of ten acts and the first act starts with the funeral of the chief priest Eze-Avuja. The custodians of Onuama clan look for a new chief priest and listen to the oracle which says that the new successor is living in the land of the white man. On the next day Obiora Nnazodie returns from America after he has lived there for fifteen years. His family sold their land, which allowed Obiora to study abroad. In America, he married Brenda to the dismay of his family who wanted him to marry an African woman.

Odukwe, a custodian of Onuama clan, assumes that Obiora has returned because Avuja has shown him the rituals to be performed to bring Obiora back to this village as it is interpreted that the oracle predicts Obiora as the new chief priest. Obiora's and Brenda's return is celebrated by the folks with music, dancing and singing. After that, a few custodians of Onuama clan visit Obiora in order to tell him that the oracle has named him the successor, the new chief

priest. Obiora, however, has not heard about his duty before and does not want to take it, either. Obiora makes clear that not the oracle called him back but his intention to start an international business in order to help Africa by contributing to its economic development. Moreover, he has come back to discover that instead of fleeing from the situation the people should rather put things in order in their country.

After Brenda has heard about the custodians' intention, she says that this reminds her of what they have been told in America about the African culture; and does not want Obiora to become the chief priest. Brenda wants the African people to improve their lives rather than talking about who is going to be the new successor. Obiora, however, is of the opinion that she should stop thinking in the American way otherwise the folks will see her as a revolutionary, which might become dangerous.

Furthermore, Obiora's half-sister Chinwe criticises Obiora for being weak and for having no children and blames Brenda, his foreign wife, for – in Chinwe's eyes - Obiora's misconduct. Obiora, however, explains to her that he did not want to marry a woman he does not love but Chinwe does not understand his point of view and calls him a disappointment for their whole family.

Obiora's uncle, Akamonye, finds out that there is a mistake somewhere in the oracle's pronouncement. He tries to convince Obiora to accept the priesthood and then pass it on to to him, but Obiora still does not show any interest in being the next chief priest. Akamonye bribed the oracle's voice to say that the next chief priest would be someone who was in the white man's job, which should have been him. Because of an overconsumption of liquor, the voice says that the successor is a man living in the white man's land, which points at Obiora.

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When Obiora's friend, Ifeanyi, notices that Obiora has returned, he visits him. Ifeanyi cannot understand Obiora's return to Africa as every African seeks for an opportunity to leave the country. Obiora explains to him that many things abroad will make him feel unwanted in the host culture and as such he will long to go back home. However, Obiora struggles to readapt to his African environment but all to no avail; therefore, Ifeanyi suggests that he should go back to America.

Obiora and Brenda are having an argument about the situation and their struggle to fit into the African culture. Obiora slaps her. She leaves him afterwards, which makes him suffer. In the end, a policeman delivers the message that Brenda was killed in her car during an armed robbery attack. On hearing the sad news of his wife's demise, Obiora becomes angry with Africa and African people. The play ends when Obiora points a gun at his uncle and shoots him.

Critical Analysis

Diaspora and hybridity are central topics in the drama, *Echoes of Madness*. Obiora Nnazodie experiences cultural hybridity. He is a returnee from America where he has lived for fifteen years. Because of his stay abroad, his people describe him as someone "who lives in a foreign land [...] who is married to a woman from a foreign land" (Nwabueze, 2001, p. 6). According to Hein's (2006) theory of hybridity, Obiora is 'the other' to his people because of the differences they notice. These differences emanate from his long stay abroad as well as from marrying a foreign woman. That means, they differentiate between themselves and Obiora.

Hybrid identities are established through contact and differences within cultures. Obiora was born and raised in Africa; therefore he belongs to Africa because he is linked to his country through his citizenship, descent and the cultural socialisation in the first years of his life. When he leaves Africa to go to America, he gets in contact with the American culture. For Hein (2006), hybridity and identities are developed through social and cultural contacts. As can be observed from Obiora's early years in America, the preponderance of his African identity is manifest. In later years, he has to come to terms with the dominance of American culture. The drama does not provide much information about his sojourn but it is assumed that he adopts the American culture. An example which underlines this thought is that Obiora wants to build up a business in Nigeria, which is typical of the American capitalist mode of thinking; however, this mode of thinking is also prevalent among the Igbo people of Nigeria, who are known for their enterprise for which Americans are known too; as Obiora puts it, "...I'm bringing in four containers of wares to start an international business [...]" (Nwabueze, 2001, p. 13).

With his prolonged stay in America, the strong influence of his culture wanes so much so that when he returns home to where he was born and raised, he is confronted with the African culture again. Bringing along his American wife exposes him to constant conflict situations between American and African cultural conditions.

It becomes clear that Obiora knows the habits of the African folks in contrast to Brenda: "Boy, these folks of yours are something else. They don't understand the decency of knocking," says Brenda (Nwabueze, 2001, p. 10) to which Obiora replies by saying: "That's what you get by marrying a native boy" (Nwabueze, 2001, p. 10). Brenda obviously differentiates herself from the African people and

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she also sees his husband as belonging to the other culture. And indeed Obiora does not deny the fact that he belongs to a different culture, since he identifies himself as a “native boy”. However, in line with Hein’s (2006) theory of hybridity, Obiora does not position himself to either his culture or the American culture, but rather sees himself as being part of both cultures. This constant struggle between both cultures is illustrated by the fact that Obiora is in a constant movement between his individual positions between the two different cultures. Whereas he sees himself more like an African in the example before, he cannot understand the African folks saying that the oracle chose him as the next chief priest: "I left for the United States. I was not directed to the shrine at all..." (Nwabueze, 2001, p. 12). He seems not to be able anymore to understand the African way of thinking: "You guys are not making any sense to me" (Nwabueze, 2001, p. 12).

His explanation concerning his return highlights his diasporic way of thinking:

[...] I’m bringing in four containers of wares to start an international business that will be the pride of this country. And my wife will engage in import and export business [...]. Her going into business is to help this damn country by contributing to its economic development (13).

Charim and Borea (2012) point out that the forth characteristic of diaspora is projection of future. These people feel obliged to return to their homeland and help the natives and develop the country. This

is exactly the reason of Obiora's return to his country: he wants to start a business which is supposed to develop his country's economy and therefore improve the native people's lives. Thus, this example aligns with Charim and Borea's (2012) fourth characteristic of Diaspora behaviour, that is, that of projection of the future.

When Obiora is in a conversation with his wife, his hybrid identity becomes obvious again. On the one hand, he cannot understand that his people want him to become the chief priest and even laughs about the chief priest's duties such as sacrificing to "the ancestral spirits and the collective incarnate dead" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 14); on the other hand, he defends his people when Brenda makes fun of them (14). Obiora tells Brenda that it is "not true" that Africans live in caves, eat raw meat and drink human blood (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 14). It seems also as if Obiora only pretends to have assimilated into the American culture when he tells his wife who accuses him of not pointing out the flaws of Africa before his fellow Africans in America that, "you have to tell them what they want to hear" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 14).

He apparently does not want to identify himself as African in America. This behaviour shows that he at least tries to belong to America rather than Africa. Being back in Africa, however, he feels insulted by Brenda making fun and saying negative things about African people. Therefore, this example underscores his hybrid identity in Africa because he seems to be in a constant psychological movement between America and Africa when he is in Africa.

Another quote, which highlights his hybrid identity, is the following: "You spend nine months in a continent and you pretend to know it inside out. However, I blame those who are daft enough to believe them." (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 14). Here, he identifies himself as a native and therefore knows the country better than a foreigner who has only spent a few months there. Here, he

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differentiates himself again from a foreigner visiting Africa, so it can be argued that he sees himself as an African. In this situation he moves closer to his African position than to his American position. In the course of interacting with his people, Obiora sees that he is not accepted with his American culture among his people; so he advises Brenda to be less American (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 16). As the examples above show, Obiora aligns with his culture when talking to Brenda. But he also aligns with Brenda when talking to his people; for example, he tells his half-sister that he has one god he adores, and that the god is Brenda (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 20). This ambiguity highlights cultural hybridity because he, Obiora, changes positions depending on whether his talking to his people in America or his people in his village. This behaviour aligns with Hein's (2006) theory of hybridity.

Although Obiora is in a constant mental movement between the African and American culture, yet he makes clear that he does not want to become a chief priest and does not "want to change [his] manner of dressing, booze or boogies" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 20). He stands beside the culture of his people when talking to them. All the same, while in America, he keeps negotiating belonging. When he talks to his friend, Ifeanyi, on why he had to leave home, he does not believe he would ever have the need to return home. As he explains to Ifeanyi, "When you get there many things will always remind you that you're in another man's country and force you to return to your fatherland" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 35). This information provides insights into his stay in America. Although he tries to adopt the American culture, yet there are always situations which make it very clear to him that he does not belong there. Even when he feels at home in America, some other Americans always

remind him that he is from another country by asking questions such as: "Do you like it here? How long have you been here? Are you gonna go back?" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 35).

Ifeanyi cannot comprehend Obiora's complaints as he thinks these are trifles: Obiora has noticed in America that he still belongs to Africa as people of diaspora do not put down their complete identity of origin and never assimilate completely.

Being back in Africa, he is also constantly reminded that he has lived abroad and is married to a foreign woman, which reminds him that he is not a pure native son of the soil anymore. In other words, Obiora's identity also partly consists of American identity, thus, his hybrid identity makes it hard for him to authentically be a native son of Africa again. As he puts it: "We can't live like you guys here. [...] We feel like people marooned in an unearthly island" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 37). This quote shows that he obviously struggles to fit into the culture of his people again.

The constant psychological movement between his identities becomes obvious. He does not feel completely belonging to either Africa or America. He has adopted both positions. To identify oneself, it is useful to differentiate between *We* and *The Others* as Hein (2006) claims, but Obiora is not able to differentiate because he feels a sense of belonging to the African culture as well as the American culture.

Ifeanyi, for his part, advises Obiora "to forget all they taught [him] in the States and learn [their] way" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 38) if he wants to live in Africa but Obiora does not answer. He neither agrees nor disagrees, so even Obiora seems not to know what he thinks about his cultural hybridity or how to deal with it.

At the end of the play Brenda argues with Obiora about how "unfriendly", "vicious" and "dishonest" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 42) his people are. Obiora defends them again and feels insulted, which

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becomes obvious when Obiora says: "Cut it, Brenda. You're talking about my people." (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 42).

During this argument Obiora blames Brenda for the problems he has faced among his people: "You're the cause of my problems. [...] It was my love for you that killed my parents" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 43). Here, again, he moves closer to his African identity which comes to a head when Obiora threatens Brenda: "Don't dare me or I'll show you the stuff African men are made of" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 43). After that, Obiora slaps her and tells her that this is how they discipline their women (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 44). This action shows that he seems to be overstrained with his identity conflict in terms of finding an appropriate balance between his two identities. Therefore, he either positions himself as almost completely African or almost completely American. Ifeanyi gives credence to this hypothesis:

A returnee has only two alternatives. Either he takes one look at the society and escapes, without looking back, or remains behind to join our madness. He created a third alternative. He did not escape, nor did he join our madness. He created a new colour of madness (Nwabueze, 2006.p 51).

When Obiora suffers from his wife's departure he identifies again with the American culture: "My America [...] My only hope" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 51), which becomes even stronger when a policeman informs him about Brenda's death: "I'll destroy them all. [...] All of you! All you mad men of this land" (Nwabueze, 2006, p. 53).

This play points out the difficulties of different identities especially after a return to the native land. Obiora constantly struggles with finding a balance between his hybrid identities because it seems as if he tries to position himself completely to either the American or the African culture, which could underscore his strive for a definite belonging and an end of cultural differences: when talking to Brenda he defends the African people as he belongs to them because he was born and raised there; when talking to Africans, however, he defends his wife and the American culture because he has lived there the last fifteen years. This behaviour shows that he adopted both cultures and identifies himself as American and African. All the examples above give credence to the fact that Obiora is not able to differentiate between himself and ‘the other’ because he feels that he belongs to both cultures, which makes it difficult for him to find his own identity.

Obiora is always reminded by his people who live with him in America that he was not born there and his people at home also remind him that he has spent a good period of his life abroad and that he is married to a foreign woman. Therefore, it is not Obiora who necessarily struggles to fit into each culture but his people who point out and constantly stress his otherness.

Conclusion

The term diaspora describes people dislocated from native homelands through migration, immigration or exile. It is also defined as fertility of dispersion or scattering seeds. The four constitutive characteristics, which are included in most of the many definitions of diaspora, are dispersion, continuity, transversal community and projection of future.

Members of the diaspora often experience two or more cultures and establish hybrid identities, which is a mixture of

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cultures and a negotiation process between cultural differences. Hybrid identities only occur if there is a confrontation between the cultures. Because of this confrontation, diasporic people constantly move their positions without displacing one culture completely. According to Hein (2006), cultural identification is easier when there is a difference between 'Us' and 'The Others'.

Applying the hybridity theory on the drama *Echoes of Madness* one notices that Obiora is a good example for a member of the diaspora and therefore for a hybrid identity. There are several examples that show that Obiora apparently did not have great problems with his identity when he grew up in Africa or when he stayed in the United States. It was shown that there was less confrontation with the other culture, respectively. However, when Obiora comes back home, he struggles with his dual identities and it seems as if he gets on well with being immersed in both African and American cultures. It is a problem for him to find a balance as he belongs to Africa because he was born and raised there but also to America because he has lived there for fifteen years. Nevertheless, he cannot completely displace one of the two cultures because he is confronted with both cultures.

Echoes of Madness was written in 1993. Because of increasing globalisation, people experience other countries and their cultures more and more. One wonders though if it is not better to relate with cultures today through the internet than create problems that come along with hybrid identity; for, having emigrated, "home" is no longer homeland for Obiora. For him, homeland is a haunted place, hell and a dungeon.

What has happened to Obiora is that he has been influenced to a very large extent by the dominant culture in the Diaspora. It is,

however, risky to consider as ‘Western’, the enlightenment that has occurred in Obiora and which makes him begin to see his culture as retrogressive. However, Obiora’s outlook toward his African culture after his sojourn in Diaspora is an attitude that will definitely be acquired through education and exposure: after all those individuals in the West who are regarded as racist cannot be said to be enlightened even when they belong to Western Culture because ignorance is the same everywhere. It can only be cured through proper education.

It seems, however, as if Obiora is able to see the flaws in his culture because of the privilege of living in a more developed society as United States of America. When men as Akamonye accuse him of no more being part of the clan as a result of his alienation to the culture he once was part of, they simply refuse to recognize the fact that, as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2008) puts it in quoting Merleau Ponty’s existential philosophical phenomenology, “situated body, like the world itself, involves a complex set of processes that continuously reveals the self a-new in relation to other bodies, new situations and new roles. This means that the body in motion and the knowledge it bears is {sic} always shifting and indeterminate. Movements in the world affect our state of being and the way we commune with the world” (p. 147-158); so living in diaspora has affected Obiora’s state of being and the way he communes with the world in relation to his community, hence his hybrid identity. So in his return, he feels no longer familiar with his people’s culture, with his “home”. When we consider that Obiora must have also felt the same way when he migrated to America, we may come to the conclusion that diaspora is as much a geographic place as it is an imaginary. In other words, the body can also be a place in which both location and dislocation happens.

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As Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2008) posits in adopting the argument of Merleau Ponty in his work *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968) that the experience of being a diaspora takes place in our bodies; in other words, the body and the world are not mutually exclusive, “because the body acts as origin to a world that already precedes it; the body, therefore, is always already situated in *place* (Yusuf, 2008)”.

For Yusuf (2008), Merleau-Pont argues that there is no absolute ontological distinction between body and world; for the body is a place, where certain views of the world are stored: views of the ways of moving, of recognising and of interacting with others, and so on. Still, a place is a form of the body: a unifying site of historical and cultural forces; in fact, as Yusuf (2008) insists, a place is as much a body as a body is a place.

Indeed, the interaction between the body and the world produces Obiora and Brenda; and as Yusuf puts it “If possessing a body entails being possessed by a world or being-in-place, being *displaced* or being *out-of-place* may have serious experiential and existential consequences for diasporic subjects. If one, therefore, is no longer *in* a geographical setting that is familiar, one can easily lose a deeply felt habitual connection to the world (Yusuf, 2008).

Dislocated from the familiarity of place, Obiora and Brenda therefore experience in a very tremendous way and quite severely the pain of being in Obiora's village. This pain is quite understandable because as Ed Casey (2009) puts it, “entire cultures can become profoundly averse to the places they inhabit, feeling atopic and displaced within their own emplacement” (p. 34). Even Obiora's wife, Brenda, follows her husband back home in pursuit of a place called “home”, that is, a place of comfort and happiness. She

finds discomfort instead: she and her husband are duped: the things they shipped home are diverted and stolen; Obiora's kinsmen deny them of peace so much so that Obiora's wife decides to go back to America and dies in a motor accident. The whole of Obiora's world comes crashing down and he seeks escape from homeland again in pursuit of a "home" that he once knew –America!

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