



Mirage of African Masculinity in Migrant Literature: A Study of Unoma Azuah's Novel *Edible Bones*

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Abstract— The concept of masculinity crisis has been a major motif in migrant literature. Bedevilled by the ghost of postcolonial experiences and cultural demands on the male character, the immigrant character in most of the migrant literature seesaws in a state of limbo. To most of the migrant characters, breaking from the shackles of poverty and developing an upright economic muscle is the main determinant of their masculine identity. The protagonist in the novel *Edible Bones* suffers mental depression as a result of the pressure to radiate the acceptable masculine identity and the incongruity of the diasporic environment with his culture. The migration of the protagonist in the novel *edible bones* is motivated by a wild assumption of the west as the center of civilization, prosperity and generally the epitome of self fulfilment as espoused by the colonial master. This research paper, analyses the masculinity crisis in migrant literature, with a special reference to Unoma Azuah's novel *edible bones*. Through the lenses of masculinity theory as espoused by Raewyn Connel (2005), this study intends to unearth how the hyped individual and cultural expectations on immigrant characters, and the dissonance of migration environment plunge the African emigrant character into masculine crisis. Through the analysis of the migrant characters in the novel *Edible Bones*, this study explored the masculinity crisis the migrant character is engulfed in, as a result of the migration experience, which leaves him more vulnerable than before. The significance of this research paper is to create some awareness on mental depression prevalent in the contemporary male character in the African society in attempt to reinvent their masculine identity.

Index Terms— masculinity, migrant literature, hegemony.

1. Introduction

The colonial process targeted the African male character, and in an unimaginable magnitude worked to annihilate his machoism. The slave trade and the colonial process was a systemic approach to totally dissipate the African masculinity and imposing a distorted perception of the West as the superior Other (Aschroft, 2002). To a greater extent, the colonial system succeeded in imprinting into the African mindset a perception of the west as the superior other. (Saxena & Shama, 2022) especially though western movies and literature.

In the midst of the turbulence of cultural demands on maleness, the African immigrant character looks into the West as an open avenue for masculine reconstruction and

reinvention. Marlin, (2017) avers that, men struggle with the expectations that have been put upon them by the society, as well as the expectations they have put on themselves. As such men must struggle to “achieve”, “prove” or in some way “demonstrate” their masculinity; a state which leads them to be always under pressure hence becoming “anxious” and temperamentally restless” (Kimmel, 1996). The desperation of attaining the cherished hegemonic masculine identity as opposed to other forms of masculinities (Connel, 2005), imposes an unquenchable drive for the African immigrant character to look at the west as the panacea to his identity reinvention.

In Migrant literature, most of the migrant characters are driven by the misconception of the west, as the epitome of economic prosperity. As such the anxiety to reinvent their economic masculinity blinds them to the realities of the diasporic environment, hence the disillusionment upon arrival in the multicultural spaces. (Adichie 2014)

The studies on the reconstruction of the African masculinities have in their background the works of Franz Fanon: *black skins, white masks*, and the historically gendered Euro-African encounter, which defaced the African psyche. As Gikunda J. (2022). aptly puts it “the de-culturization originating from the colonial experience left the African man psychologically and socially disemboweled after his language and cultural practices that sustained him for centuries were taken away, leaving him with a strong negative image of his way of doing and imagining.” consequently, the African immigrant character is left with a unidimensional perception of the West as the cradle of masculo-economic liberation.

Mate, (2017) argues that “hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity that influences boy's and men's understanding of how they have to act in order to be acceptably male and that this dominant male is associated with heterosexuality, toughness, power, authority, competitiveness and subordination of gay men” (pg 10). In a desperate attempt to realize these ideal masculine qualities, the immigrant character is strained and almost driven to desperation in an attempt to live up to this expectation. Ngoh (2016). In the novel *Edible Bones*, Kaito undergoes humongous pains in attempting

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to reclaim and reinvent his masculine identity as construed to him by the African culture in the multicultural spaces in vain.

Upon migration to the diasporic spaces, the African immigrant character faces a myriad of cultural shocks, which not only disorients him, but also leaves him in a precarious state of disillusionment. This stems from the fact that, “the African immigrant male characters do not arrive in the diasporic spaces bereft of notions related to their manliness. On the contrary, they usually bring with them encultured beliefs and well-established practices about manliness and gender relations”. (Donaldson and Howson, 2006). As a result of these established beliefs and practices on masculinity, the immigrant character faces insurmountable challenges towards a smooth integration and operation in the multicultural environment.

Unoma Azuah’s novel *edible bones* is a clear demonstration of the crisis the immigrant African immigrant character wades in, in the diasporic spaces and the ultimate price he has to pay in the pursuit of the masculine mirage in the lens of the supposed American dream. (Musonye, 2007)

2. Analysis of Masculine Crisis in the Novel *Edible Bones*

Kaito, the protagonist in the novel *edible bones*, migrates to America with a hyped expectancy of quickly and easily acquiring economic stability, dominance, independence and marry for progeny, the traits which define an ideal masculine character, according to his cultural orientation. His first proclamation on meeting his cousin Kamalu is:

“Man, I can’t wait to settle in with you and begin to make fat American money.” Pg 19

His migration to America is an imagined quick fix mission, to counter all his economic challenges and attain the desired masculine identity. In anticipation of Kaito’s economic transformation and the ‘would have been assistance’ from him then, his parents sell the last piece of land to facilitate him while his friends offer him monetary gifts for the same. However, upon arrival in America, the reality hits him bareknuckle. The open opportunities that he had anticipated turns to a mirage. Despite this, he could not muster courage to tell his parents or his friends of the huddles he was facing and has to put on a brave face. Reminiscing on the fancy expectations from his parents and friends, the author states:

His parents sold the remaining piece of family land to buy his ticket. They had sold three other pieces of land to put him through school. The seventy dollars he had was a parting gift from his friends. He winced at the thought of telling his family and friends that he couldn’t make it in America. They would ask him if the other Nigerians who sent cars and built mansions were more intelligent; if they had two heads and he had only one head. Pg. 20

Affirming Marlin’s (2017) assertion, Kaito is driven by the expectations of his parents and those of his friends, to stretch himself beyond the available horizons as to prove himself man enough. The association with the west is viewed as an obvious leverage to economic vantage. The failure to relive this expectation frustrates Kaito to a point of breaking legal bounds to survive. On arriving back home, his friends, though more economically stable than him, look up to him as more endowed,

and expect more from him.

“But how long have you lived in America? Three years...and you’re yet to build a mansion. Is this the same America I know, or a different America? I know of guys who make a killing with just a few years in Germany, even in America. “Man, try to be like other people who come home millionaires or just give me your passport. I will help you make the money when I get there. Pg. 166

His mother too wonders why Kaito has taken too long to build a mansion at home just like his agemates. When Kaito almost runs out of cash and demands for some money from the kit he had given her to keep, his mother blast him and dismisses him for slaking on his responsibility:

“What money?... “How much did we borrow to buy your flight ticket alone? What about the pieces of land we had to sell?” pg 166

Amidst the ranting of his parents and friends over how people easily thrive in the west, “ He (Kaito) bit his lower lip and stared at the floor. If only they knew what he had gone through in America.” Pg. 182. These expectations from home, drive Kaito into a state of desperation to a point of going psycho.

The African cultural orientation on male characters conforms to Connel’s (2005) assertion on masculine dominance over female characters and other weaker males. While working as a guard in the American embassy, Kaito could lash on people scrambling to access the American embassy with no repercussion.

He had to use clubs and sticks and chains sometimes to keep away the horde of people who were always pressing and sometimes crashing through the security gate to know the status of their visas. He had the choice to treat them like wild animals on the loose... he started enjoying the power he could flex. Pg. 44

However, on arrival in America, Kaito is taken aback, when he assaults Beth, and is forced to beg on his knees to avoid being reported to the police. The power and masculine dominance that he enjoyed then fades and is left in a desperate pursuit of it.

“Beth had scrambled up from the floor crying, and headed for the door. Kamalu blocked her way and begged. Tears trickled down his cheeks. He knelt down and pleaded with Beth. She insisted that she would take the money for the abortion and then file an assault charge against Kaito. When Kaito saw Kamalu’s tears, the gravity of what he had done dawned on him. He begged Beth too and offered her all the money he had saved. Kamalu had to add some of his money to convince Beth to forgive him.” Pg 23

Kaito is desperate to reclaim his masculine standing, but the western culture offers him a hard reality to contend with. When he differs with Sabrina, she dares him to touch her “Don’t let those filthy fists of yours come any closer to my face. Otherwise, I’ll get your black ass hurled off to jail,” she had told him. Pg. 48. As a man Kaito feels helpless in the hands of a female character, simply because of his status as an immigrant and his economic dependency. The fact that he has to rely on Sabrina for accommodation, and later on Jemina, Kaito is thrown at a masculine crisis to a point that he loses his masculine grip even the control of his sexual relationship with

Jemina.

She (Jemina) started ordering him around, as if he were some servant. “Kaito, wash the dishes!” “Kaito, clean out the yard!” “Kaito, make the bed!” He didn’t mind all the orders she gave until she started yelling and scolding him like a child....Kaito accepted almost every request she made in bed as long as she was not going to lie on top of him. Pg. 70

The precarious masculine crisis of an immigrant character in reference to dominance over women is further espoused through Abuda, an African professor, who is thrown out of his house by his wife, and forced into a life of misery, to a point that he cannot even think of returning back home. The narrator observes that:

... Abuda had thought about returning home but stayed in the U.S., knowing that his family members would never let him live down his coming back home. They would treat him as an outcast, an *akalogoli*, a loser who had the opportunity to live in America, transform his life, and the lives of his relatives but failed at it. He did not want to be laughed at, ostracized, and tagged a failure. Yet, he was a greater failure in America. Pg. 32

In the African cultures, marriage was the hallmark of masculinity (Kenyatta, 1938). Migritude literature presents migrant characters in a desperate struggle to manifest masculinity through the institution of marriage. However, the concept, definition and role of marriage drifts from their ingrained cultural scope, and therefore, they have to reconfigure themselves to the new dawn. Kaito analyses the role of a woman from his African orientation and is dissatisfied with his preconceived inversion of masculine and feminine roles. In a desperate pursuit of the elusive masculine prowess:

The one thing that bothered Kaito about Sabrina was that she didn’t like cooking and cleaning the apartment. His hope was to marry her and then domesticate her, teach her how to cook even his favorite native Nigerian meal; teach her how to greet his family in Nigeria; wash her underwear with her hands, and how to clean a house well. Pg 57

In a desperate attempt to “domesticate” her, Kaito tries severally to inculcate in her the feminine attributes that would accord him the masculine entity of a husband.

He would often tell her that he was not supposed to cook at all since there was a woman in the house. He would tell her not to drink, and not to smoke in public, that these were not good habits for a woman who intended to become a mother some day. Sabrina never agreed with him, and found his reasons ridiculous. Pg. 48

Despite being in desperation for marriage, Kaito is taken aback by the traits he finds in most of the female characters he meets with. At first, he had dismissed Beth as “That woman is not marriage material” pg. 16. The last in the list is Jemina who commands him like a servant simply because Kaito is desperate for survival. The search for an ideal wife turns to a mirage in the wake of the economic and legal challenges haunting the immigrant character. In this respect, the migrant character shifts to pursuing marriage not from a masculine perspective but as a licence to legal citizenship in the diasporic spaces. Kamalu on learning that Kaito had cohabited with Beth for two months

exclaims: “You could have at least married her...That way she could have been of some use to you.” Pg 16. On approaching his cousin Kamalu, in relation to the entrapped relationship he had been lured into, “Kamalu advised him to not just be Jemina’s man but to go ahead and marry her.” 69 despite the fact that Kaito didn’t love her. In view of marriage as a tool for survival in the diasporic spaces. Kamalu further adds:

“You’ll learn how to love her. At this point you’re even more than desperate. You’re in quick sand now. Jemina seems like the only one who can pull you out.” 69

Further from view of marriage from the masculine perspective, amin redefines it from a business view as he advises Kaito:

In fact, you do trade by barter relationship with this woman. I don’t see anything wrong with it. Get what you want from her and let her get what she wants from you.”...“You cheap already, Kaito. You have no papers, no full time job, no name, no nothing. How else you define cheap?” Kaito stared at Amin for a while, unsure of what to say next. He knew that something like this would not have happened to him in his own country. He had more control of his life as a man. Pg 74

The pursuit of marriage from a masculine perspective eludes the migrant character so desperately, thus leaving him an empty shell of himself, with only the past to reminisce on.

3. Conclusion

The African migrant character in migritude literature suffers mental depression as a result of the aborted mission to quickly and smoothly fix the challenges bedeviling his masculine identity, and which in his naive expectancy hoped the diasporic environment will offer a quick solution. Before relocating, the migrant character views the west as an easy route to reclaiming the cherished masculine identity and restoring the lost fame. The expectations of the migrant character to quickly realize the esteemed masculine traits turns to a mirage and a dream nearly impossible to achieve. In the novel *edible bones*, Kaito, the protagonist, struggles to grab the much-anticipated financial stability, dominance, and eventually marry as to reach the apex of masculinity in vain. He suffers mental depression as a result of botched up mission. Zulkibulu also ends up in jail and into queerness out of frustrations. It is therefore clear from this text that, masculinity is a mirage and not a reality in migritude literature.

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