

## The African City and Existentialism in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*

Oghenekaro E. Ilolo

### Abstract

A close reading of African fiction reveals that there is a substantial body of city writing in Africa. However, critical materials on the city as a subject of its own in the African novel are scarce. This study, therefore, focuses on how the city is previewed as a subject of its own with specific attention on how the city's decadence creates psychological dislocation in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. This study adopts postcolonialism and existentialism as its theoretical framework. Since space, place and location are significant factors in literary studies, the study examines how place functions and is recreated through text and how the urban environment affects the characterization of the story. There is also a relationship between the themes of contradiction, diversity and creativity in the portrayal of the survival of the characters in the African city. This study is significant in its proposition of an alternate view of appraising African city narratives whereby the city is treated as a subject throwing up myriad issues that define its existence and human relationships. The city, therefore, becomes an important item in the negotiation of both individual and national identities and recreates how the depiction of decadence affects existentialist alienation and psychological dislocation in African fiction. In other words, the city affects every facet of society in terms of how we appraise interaction, space and urban development in African fiction.

### Introduction

The African novel has evolved as a literary genre for documenting the African experience. Most African novels deal with issues bordering on the prevalent socio-political and cultural representations. With the development of modern African cities, the urban cityscape and the living experiences in these cities have elicited a new form of African commentary that relates to how the city or urban spaces are presented in terms of the fallouts of interaction, social decadence and psychological dislocation.

Writers and urban spaces are intricately related as the society contributes to the experiences the writer portrays in his work. Thus, this study is an attempt to establish the connection between the two. The study explores how the city can be read as a subject as well as how it impacts on the characterisation in the selected texts. The study is particularly interested in the experience of African urban spaces and how they are represented in the African novel. Indeed, Africa as a developing continent becomes a very interesting site for a study of this kind due to the intense relationships under the different political cultures, especially military dictatorships and the access to governance

that followed their eventual collapse. Most African cities have, since the colonial era, been contested sites of struggle. This is because during the period of colonialism they represented western control and influence over Africa and Africans. Thus, African cities, according to Garth Myers “are amid both the temporal and conceptual aftermath of colonialism trying to find ways to deal with or subvert those legacies...” (69). However, in recent years the African city has continued to morph along different spectra and it has come to represent a source of diversity and creativity to the African people. The city landscape is now more of a site of struggle because of the urgency it carries politically, economically, and architecturally. Invariably, African cities have changed considerably and the struggles in the cities of Africa are now associated with concerns that border on issues such as identity, migration and diseases. Most of Africa's population now comprises urban dwellers.

Cities in Africa have become the sites of major political, economic and social innovations and thus play a critical role in the ongoing national politics and socio-economic development. However, the city, as represented in the African novel, has been inadequately researched. The extant studies portray the city mainly as a setting for events. It is therefore our intention to treat the city as an active agent in the narratives under study, especially with regard to how the city affects human characters.

This study appraises how urban life and cityscapes are represented in the African novel and to describe how stories in the selected novels are organized to show the perspective from which this representation gains its objectives. This research is particularly concerned with how psychological dislocation and social decadence are represented as consequences of living in the modern African urban space in the Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the Postcolonialism and existentialism as theoretical handles. Postcolonialism presupposes that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is reflected in the literature of the colonized. According to Charles Bressler, “Postcolonialism ... can be defined as an approach to literary analysis that particularly concerns itself with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries. It usually excludes literature that represents either British or American viewpoints and concentrates on writings from colonized or formerly colonized cultures in ... Africa...and other places that were once dominated by, but remained outside of, the white, male, European cultural, political, and philosophical tradition” (199). In other words, the postcolonial theory necessitates the analysis and explanation on the effects that colonization has had on the experience presented in the literature of the colonized. Consequently, themes such as racial segregation, political instability

and neo-colonialism are continuously enmeshed in the propagation of this theory.

As a literary theory, postcolonialism more often than not, refers to the literature produced by formerly colonized people who have gained their independence, yet are still under the yoke of the colonial consciousness as a result of language and cultural shakeups. Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism* (1978), seems to be the first to categorize the idea of postcolonialism. In it, Said studies the cultural representation which seems to be the basis for postcolonial theory. As a result, most literature after colonialism is deemed postcolonial not necessarily because of the themes it treats, but mainly as a fall-out of the colonial experience.

The application of the theory of postcolonialism will enable this study to realise the interpretation of the themes and techniques derivable from the selected texts from the angle of the dominated. Moreso, the postcolonial theory will equally express how African cities are occupied by people of different classes, background and ethnicity with emphasis on the relationships between postcolonial social decadence and psychological dislocation.

Existentialism is also adopted as a theory in this work. Existentialism is the philosophy that makes an authentically human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world (Christopher Panza and Gregory Gale, 28). It is essentially the search of the condition of man, the state of being free, and man's ability to use his freedom. Existentialists believe in the idea of existence preceding essence; in other words, that man must first acknowledge his existence before knowing the meaning or purpose of his existence (Stephen Priest, 21). Existentialism is a philosophical thought that deals with the conditions of existence of the individual person and their emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts.

Jean-Philippe Deranty (427) stresses in his article "Existentialist Aesthetics" that existentialism owes its name to its emphasis on "existence". Existence indicates the special way in which human beings are in the world, in contrast with other beings. For the existentialist, the human being is "more" than what it is: not only does the human being know that it is, but, on the basis of this fundamental knowledge, this being can choose how it will "use" its own being, and thus how it will relate to the world. "Existence" is thus closely related to freedom in the sense of an active engagement in the world (Deranty, 427). Priest argues that most existentialist thinkers are interested in: what is it to exist? Does existence have a purpose? Is there an objective difference between right or wrong? Are we free? Are we responsible for our actions? What is the right sort of religious, political, or sexual commitment? How should we face death? (29). For the existentialist, man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself (Cagri Mart, 50). In applying the ideas of

existentialism, this paper engages how the realities of modern cities have influenced characters to the point that they experience psychological despair, alienation, and disillusionment. These existentialist experiences define the essence of characters in the selected texts.

### **The Place of the City in Literary Scholarship**

Some studies have been done to examine the place of the city in African literature, especially in the genre of fiction. One of these is by Christopher Ouma, who sees the city, Lagos in particular, as a “collage of images of poverty and affluence, a dual city of conflicting material realities which may be observed in the aural images of this city, as well as the cultural energy that it generates” (140). However, our observation on his reading of Lagos as an African city is predicated on the fact that some parts of the African city, especially slums like Maroko, are treated like disposable geographies where existence is negotiated from a juxtaposition of extremes of squalor and wealth.

Rita Nnodim traces the politics of urban spaces and identities in African novels by contemplating the dystopic city spaces of the Nigerian postcolony. Nevertheless, in some of the novels, protagonists encounter quite essentially, urban figures who begin functioning as their teachers despite the odds. Sarah Nuttal reads the city as constituted by layers of texts – billboards, newsprints, road signs and other representative textual markers. In this manner, the text is constituted as material culture and therefore the represented city – the literary city itself. A good example is Maroko and Lagos in Abani’s *Graceland*, which becomes part of a material and a symbolic culture which Nuttal argues, is the symbolic “literary infrastructure that constitutes the city’s imaginary shape” (33). From Nuttal’s observation, Ouma suggests that the process of constructing identity in city spaces is conditioned by numerous factors that are further complicated by Africa’s post-colonial condition which in our opinion seems an adequate response to the issues of corruption that has beleaguered most African nation states and cities.

The cityscape allows for the blurring of imaginative and concrete conditions. This is because, the city is a place in which modernity, through technology and forms of mass mediation affect identity formation. It is a highly unsettled space that constructs post-colonial subjects that in the wake of the increasing mobility of cultures are at the crossroads for imaginative choices. A pastiche of cultures, the postcolonial African city is the site of contemporary postmodern identity within an increasing global order. The postcolonial condition of the cityscape; survival, flight, utopia, dystopia, desires are all an embodiment of specific characteristics that defines each African city and hence creates its own identity.

In their introductory essay, Tan Edensor and Mark Jayne charge that urban theory, unlike other fields and disciplines (such as cultural theory or

political theory), has been slow in participating in debates about epistemologies, typologies and dualisms used to define and seek meaning. They seek, in this volume, to challenge the assumptions underpinning the study of cities and investigate the ways in which parochial theoretical agendas have dominated the field. They count this volume to be part of a recent wave of urban scholarship and theory that seeks to re-ignite “the city” so as to decolonize the imagining of cities and therefore urban theorizing. Incidentally, the above scenario fits into the same projections of a mobile and modern urbanity that we seem to envisage for the development of Africa and which we wish was more representative in African novels.

John Mcfarlane presents “ground accounts” of South African urbanisms and “everyday practices” with an eye towards urban infrastructure and materials as they relate to how dwellers come to know, traverse, navigate and negotiate the city, and “how things get done in the city” (7). They place this volume within “a broader momentum in urban studies to “rematerialize” the city, that is, to attend to the crucial role of urban materials. The comparative element in this volume, he writes, works temporarily as well as spatially as comparative projects, which he says, also bring to the fore the disparities in scholarship on various countries within the region, and cities within the same country. They also placed this volume in the growing body of comparative urban studies that seek to theorize the city outside the Euro-American context.

Patricia Ehrkamp notes that “urban theory cannot merely be informed by internationalist concerns and commitments, it has to be transformed by them” (56). Mcfarlane’s comparative strategies of indirect learning across theory cultures must also be an occasion to reflect on the questions of scholarly authority, power and privileges and to pledge to an internationalist commitment and praxis that entails being personally engaged, vested and accountable to the community. Urbanists write about and for – a set of questions and concerns that Mcfarlane terms “ethnico- politics”. These three overlapping areas that Mcfarlane identifies are of utmost importance if, in his words, “comparison is to assist in producing research that reflects a more global understanding of the urban” (64).

Jennifer Robinson has observed that, “South African cities concretized some of the worst excesses of apartheid rule — its divisions, exclusions and inequalities. ... But today the city also underpins our imagination of being one nation” (273). Indeed Robinson’s observation here makes it glaring that African cities, especially those in South Africa are very important markers of the socio-cultural diversity of the African continent. The city therefore becomes a collage of numerous ethno-national identities that bequeath the nomenclature of the state to African people. Meg Samuelson pushes the debate further, when she insists that the city, Johannesburg, in particular, is like a cauldron which houses

different groups and races, thus, Post-Apartheid South Africa is described today with the metaphor of a rainbow nation:

a new national culture; yet the divisive features of yesteryears course across its landscape like an angry scar, shaping the circuits of movement and exchange possible within its ambits. At the same time, while city-spaces stand at the heart of the national imagination they simultaneously present nodal points in transnational networks. (247-248)

Although the city is a pointer to the concept of diversity in Africa, RankaPrimorac notes that “Plots built around the theme of a big city’s potential to destroy innocence and beauty have marked the entire history of Zimbabwean fiction” (13). Invariably, the city therefore constitutes a very powerful force for the destruction of innocence in most African narratives.

### **The City, Psychological Dislocation and Social Decadence in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* and ZakesMda’s *Ways of Dying***

The thesis of this paper is that the city creates psychological dislocation and social decadence. To establish this position, a literary content analysis of the selected texts will be done in order to ascertain the extent to which the cities represented in the texts have affected the characters.

Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* conceptualizes Lagos as a place of jungle justice. The citizens do not trust security agencies and judiciary system for prompt responses and action, because there is a “judicial system choking, even over commercial matters” (274). Also, it takes a longer time frame for security agencies to perform their constitutional duties because of corruption. Therefore, Lagosians sometimes take laws into their hands. On this, the narrator writes that in “a Lagos street, justice happened straight away. You knocked someone’s car and they beat you... you stole anything, and the people could beat you until they killed you” (148). This is because most Lagosians are hungry and angry with the leadership style of the country. They will do anything within their reach to protect themselves in any hostile situation. Here, the novel shows a typical representation of the reaction of an average African citizen to crisis in any African street which Lagos stands for.

Another city discourse in the novel is the high rate of societal decadence among Lagosians. The subject of rape and its psychological impact is also treated in the novel. The novel gives a vivid description of how a group of boys raped Sheri (Enitan’s best friend) after drugging her in a beach party (58-63). Here, the text shows Lagos as a city where men cannot control their sexual

instincts, thus satisfying themselves by raping vulnerable girls in the society has become the norm. Also, the novel reveals the inability of parents to have knowledge of their children's whereabouts and the kind of relationships and activities they keep outside their homes. This is because, most parents in Lagos are too busy with their careers to establish or create cordial relationships with their children. Their children, especially, the girls are involved in social vices, such as, drug addictions and abuse, alcoholism, secret societies, sexual misconducts, etcetera. Consequently, without proper parental upbringing, the city turns girls into bad, loose and sexually or morally lax individuals. They somehow end up being raped as she reveals: "Bad girls got raped. We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls" (65). The novel is therefore set out to correct these social wrongdoings in the society.

Furthermore, the novel showcases prostitution as another social malaise. Prostitution is presented as a professional business in the streets of Lagos. The city attracts a lot of commercial sex workers because of its high reception of immigrants. As the narrator puts it: "As we drove through the gates of Mama Maria, a group of prostitutes ... wiggled their tongues and pressed their breasts to the windscreen. They made shrill noises like huntsmen. Once, they realized we were not white men, they abandoned us" (89). Nevertheless, the text still points out the fact that the presence of prostitutes and immigrants in Lagos increases the rate of transferring sexually transmitted diseases in the city. Thus, the narrator cries out that: "So far, in Lagos, we blamed expatriates and prostitutes for AIDS" (87).

Immorality among family members is another common societal concern that has a psychological dimension in the city of Lagos as depicted in the novel. Most families in the city are hence dysfunctional. Marriage consequently, becomes a game for the smart member of the family. Marital unfaithfulness is part of the Lagos society because: "Half of Lagos had an outside family, and the other half wasn't aware" (155). Also, the city plays host to lots of polygamous families:

Children of polygamous homes, this was their refrain, that civil marriages didn't work anyway. They boasted about their numerous relations, elevated their mothers to sainthood. "Pity your own self," they would tell me, "we are not unhappy with our family arrangement." They rarely confessed about domestic battles. (246)

Another remarkable portrayal of Lagos in the novel is in its prison system. The system is highly influenced by corruption, abuse of power, and lack of true judicial process. The Lagos prison system in the text represents the state of affairs in post-independent Africa. The prison is a metaphorical prison. The use of metaphor in the novel proposes that Lagosians and Africans at large, are imprisoned in the neo colonial concepts of military dictatorship, where oppression of the masses is the order of the day. The prison in the novel is an idea rather than to be appreciated as a physical penitentiary. The text reveals to us how the military government uses their veto powers to exploit and imprison Lagosians through the instrumentality of security agencies. Thus, the idea of the prison in this context is to keep the citizens of Lagos in perpetual mental underdevelopment via the instrumentalities of fear and oppression. The novel reveals an oppressive system powered by a military government that cares less for its citizens. Also, the prison system represents an African nation where poverty, sickness and absence of proper medical care is glaring:

Nobody speaks to you in detention, you see. If you don't cooperate, they transfer you to a prison somewhere else, packed with inmates. Sick inmates. You end up with pneumonia, tuberculosis, and you won't get proper medical attention. Jaundice, diarrhea- food in Nigerian prison isn't very good. (220)

To “cooperate” in this situation means to compromise and promote corruption. Lagosians are forced to promote corruption through bribery and compromise just to distort justice before, during and after police detention in any crisis situation. Similarly, the narrator puts it this way: “I knew not to argue with the police. Give them money... Move on” (241). However, the Lagosian ends up in prison if he/she fails to “cooperate”. This is how most people in Nigeria end up in the prison: “Half the people in prison... are awaiting trial. Some of them die before they see a court room” (323), because they refuse to “cooperate” or they do not have the means to “cooperate” with the police. Furthermore, one can imagine a prison where the authorities “packed inmates” together with different types of disease without food and “proper medical attention”. Lack of good food in the prison is a testament to the fact that there is a high rate of poverty and hunger in post-colonial Lagos.

In the area of instability, Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* portrays the city of Lagos as the capital of Lagos State, in South Western Nigeria. The city is the most populated metropolitan cluster in Nigeria. Lagos has hosted a lot of political events and activities from the early periods of post-colonial Nigeria to the present. Lagos is a city,



where people threw car tires over other people and set them on fire because they belonged to different political factions. Uncle Alex blamed the British for the fighting: “Them and their bloody empire. Come here (Lagos) and divide our country like one of their bloody tea cakes. Driving on the left side of the bloody road...” our first Prime Minister was killed by a Major General, that the Major General was soon killed, and that we have another Major General heading our country. (9)

These happenings in Lagos metamorphose into the developments of other political events in Nigeria. According to the narrator in *Everything Good Will Come*: “We had had two military governments since the summer of 1975. The first ended with the assassination of our head of state; the second, in a transition to civilian rule... these civilians, they are worse than the military” (75). All these activities take place on the streets of Lagos. Furthermore, the author indirectly reveals that these events on the streets of Lagos are influenced by external powers from the West, especially, the “CIA-backed coups and assassinations” because “our stolen wealth was invested in their country” (323). The result of this is political volatility in the country and economic reliance on the West, because according to SaroWiwa, Nigeria “was carved up in the European interest” (109).

Western intervention in Nigerian politics thus leads to leadership crisis in the country. The political environment is where politicians rig elections by their will and arrangements, no independence of press and of opposition. Also, these politicians employ the services of government agencies to frustrate activities of pressure groups, because the latter serves as public checks on government policies to avoid abuse and waste of public resources. However, when all avenues at the disposal of pressure groups to correct politicians become unsuccessful, the military is tempted to leave the barracks for state houses or palaces. They take over political power with the intention to correct all political aberrations caused by the political class. Thus, there is a scramble for political power between the soldiers and the politicians: “Politics in our country was a scuffle between the military and politicians. Both were conservative” (77). The city of Lagos becomes the stage for this drama because of the presence of all the three military organs, their command headquarters, with an over populated barracks in the city.

There is no civility in the design of the Nigerian military. They are constitutionally formed to fight for and to protect the nation's territorial integrity against internal and external aggressions. Yet, they force themselves into the governance of the nation with the aim of fighting indiscipline and corruption. They "claimed they wanted to wage war against indiscipline, and yet they couldn't fight it among themselves. Military coups are the worst form of indiscipline. No respect for the constitution. No respect for those in power" (124). The results of these actions are military coups and counter coups which unfortunately, unfold in Lagos city space. The violation of the fundamental human rights of Lagosians became the order of the day in the streets of Lagos, because the city is the centre of all political, socio-cultural and commercial activities in the country. Similarly, Atta's stance comes handy when she writes:

Our problems are ours to solve, not anyone else's. I'm not one of those who believe in crying to the West. They still haven't got it right themselves. Freedom of speech, human rights, democracy. Democracy, some would say it's for sale. Besides, their leaders are constrained. They can't help us if helping us will hurt their constituents. We will always have to look within for our own solutions. I have faith in Africa anyway. A continent that can produce a Mandela? (323)

Apart from believing that Africa's internal problems can be solved by Africans, Atta notes that these issues can be resolved via democratic means. Thus she writes: "The Army have no place in government" (67). Nevertheless, the city witnesses the full involvement of the military in the political governance of the nation that allows anti-democratic activities to prevail throughout the country that annuls the general elections of June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1993. Consequently, like wide fire, the novel presents the emergence of pro-democratic coalitions and protests against the military government from the streets of Lagos to other parts of the country:

Pro-Democratic groups immediately called for the boycott of the constitutional conference. They organized protests, which ended in gunfire, and deaths. The National Democratic Coalition was formed. Then the winner of the general elections was arrested and detained when he declared himself president. Oil workers went on strike and this led to petrol

AbraKa Humanities Review, Vol. 10 Num. 1, 2020

shortages. The Nigerian Bar Association, teachers' unions, university students, joined the protest. (191)

Consequently, the military government indiscriminately creates laws, without endorsement by a legislative assembly. Also, they suspend the constitution and replace it with a decree that dehumanizes Lagosians. This is because the junta signifies an exact oppressive structure in the subliminal state on the people of Lagos in the novel. The opinions of this oppressive system advance into behavioural contagion, rejection of the military rule and values by Lagosians. The description of the military government therefore influences the peoples' behavioural systems and their way of living in the environment in the text that,

there was a military coup. Our head of state was overthrown. I watched as our new ruler made his first announcement on television. "I, Brigadier..." The rest of his words marched away... My father fumed throughout the announcement. "What is happening?" these army boys think they can pass us from one hand to another... That was how it was in our house over the next few weeks. There was a dusk to dawn curfew in Lagos and I wanted it to end so I could have the house to myself. (66-67)

The unpredictable intervention of the military into politics as cited above affects the thinking patterns of most Lagosians in the novel. This is because the junta creates martial laws to regulate the activities and movement of people. Also, press freedom is denied in the novel. The government censors all news platforms to protect the interest of the junta. The military government goes further to detain "students, lawyers, union leaders, ex-politicians, journalist, any individual they considered enemies of state. They passed new decrees... seizes passport, imposed exit visa restriction on journalists" (191), to forcefully controlling the dissemination of information in the public sphere. With the stroke of a pen, they promulgated:

Decree Two, under which persons suspected of acts prejudicial to state security could be detained without charge; Decree Four, under which journalists could be arrested and

imprisoned for publishing any information about public officials. (78)

In reaction to these pressures, most journalists go underground just to pass the truth of the state of affairs of the nation to Lagosians, despite the fact that the “government had warned the newspaper editors not to speculate about the coup” (292). Some journalists even pay the ultimate sacrifices in the line of duty in the hands of the military government. According to Grace Ameh: “Our reporters are being dragged in every week, no explanation given. They’re kept in detention for weeks, questioned, or they are left alone, which I am told is worse” (220).

Also, out of selfishness, greed and corruption, security agencies unlawfully and wrongfully arrest and detain many Lagosians without warrants of arrest in the novel. According to Enitan, “Niyi went to the police station the next morning. They told him my arrest was an unfortunate incident” (283), meaning there was no obvious reason for the arrest. However, the secret reason for this unlawful arrest and many other forms of human rights violations is to crack down on any form of protest and opposition against the military government of the day. Thus, Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* attacks the Nigerian military for their intervention in Nigerian politics. At this instant, she employs satire as a tool to expose the irony in the novel. Perhaps, the conviction is that military involvement in political affairs will improve the living conditions of Lagosians because they are dedicated and self-restraint in their responsibilities. As a result, they adopt political power with the habitual promise of improving the political and economic institutions existing in Lagos and by extension, Nigeria as a whole. Also, they regard themselves as redeemers of the country. Yet as SaroWiwa puts it, the “redeemers of the nation soon acquired a reputation for corruption and for wrong-footing their adversaries...Remaining in power had become an obsession for them” (77). The novel consequently attacks these erroneous aims of the military by presenting an unbiased appraisal of their inability to achieve their political promises to the nation. Similarly, in this regard, Adebayo Williams (1991) writes that,

our new paradigm of literary study, then, should be firmly anchored in the historical and social conditions of possibility of cultural production in Africa. Within this context, it must offer the opportunity to interrogate institutions, organisations, formations, personalities, events, artefacts... within the African cultural process. (11)

Psychological trauma arising from an insecure mind is also a major thrust in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. The impression of the prison in the text is physical, metaphorical as well as psychological. This is because the prisoners are not just confined within iron bars and concrete walls, but in colonial concepts of overlord and subjects, which affect their relationships with one another in the prison. There is a master/slave relationship among the inmates in the prison. For example, the most prominent prisoner in the female prison is called the: "Mother of Prisons" because "she was always fighting" (274) to subdue other inmates. Thus, the text shows that the only way Africans can free themselves from the concepts of overlord and subjects, is by personal and mental development.

The dynamics of daily life and living in Lagos city in the novel plays an important role because the author connects the city with the historical period, political and socio-cultural occurrences beyond the literary rendition of the story. We find that the portrayal of Lagos city in *Everything Good Will Come* shows the integration of the cultural practices and business opportunities between Lagosians and other immigrants in the city. Also, the description of the city can be seen as static as well as contradicting because of the dilapidated nature of infrastructures and slow pace of development. The study has shown that the presentation of Lagos in the text is informed by the presence of poverty, crimes, military coups, corruption, abuse of power, human rights violations and a lack of proper judicial process. This experience in the city represents most post-colonial African societies.

*Ways of Dying on the other hand*, takes a look at the attempt by South African youths struggling to eke out a living in poor neighborhoods in the heart of the city, and also at the various ways in which the city takes advantage of its more inexperienced inhabitants who learn to cultivate new identities and make a myriad of adjustments in order to make an existence for themselves. This way, he is able to go beyond certain physical and social constraints which happen to be imposed on him by the powers that controls the city's underworld and society. The central theme of the novel is the realization of the need to do away with legends which contribute to the dichotomy between rural and urban settlements in South Africa. One finds communities or settlements which have already been destroyed by the AIDS pandemic having their bonds severed further by xenophobia and prejudice. This study pursues the notion that Mda's novel proposes a re-orientation of urban communities' ideologies with the tolerance and understanding of other people and other cultures as its ultimate aim.

In general, this work addresses the issue of institutional and personal adjustments in present day South Africa as showcased in *Ways of Dying*. This study posits that as an individual's physical and social environment changes, so

also does his/her identity change. By analyzing these texts, we are granted access to the inner workings and complexities of the South African urban landscape because the writer queries certain components of post-apartheid South Africa which truncated social advancement. The foremost thrust of this work is to effectively capture the lone individual's quest to create a niche for himself in a landscape rife with the perils that abound from the struggle of rural/urban migration to racial and social equality on the famously long route to democracy.

Following the abolishment of apartheid, the subsequent change in certain laws, the urban migration laws paved the way for a paradigm shift in cultural production and consumption in post-apartheid South Africa. In *Ways of Dying*, Zakes Mda ingeniously reconstructs both the past and present worlds in South Africa, allowing his brilliant stories act as the basis for the creation of a more understanding and progressive future in South Africa. Andre Brink suggests that South African fictional works after the apartheid era should not be a *direct* representation of the reality, but a *creative* one. Psychological dislocation in the city is informed by the attributes of the characters in the novel. Toloki, who is the main protagonist, revels in living in the city. The new found freedom from Apartheid gives him a new lease on life as he broods living in the city:

Toloki walks to the taxi rank, which is on the other side of the downtown area or what is called the central business district. The streets are empty, as all the stores are closed. He struts like a king, for today the whole city belongs to him. He owns the wide tarmac roads, the skyscrapers, the traffic lights, and the flowers on the sidewalk. That is what he likes most about this city. It is a garden city with flowers and well-tended shrubs and bushes growing at every conceivable place.  
(45)

Despite this glowing tribute to the city, we know that behind this façade lie a city at variance with itself. The city is the setting and representation of the psychological dislocation Toloki and most of the characters experience in the story. Disillusionment is another factor we have to consider in our analysis. The sense of alienation felt by Toloki heightens our recreation of the treatment of dislocation. Toloki's sense of dejection and rejection is further heightened when Nefolovhodwe treats him like a dog and rejects to help him get employment:

The master does not remember you. But he has a vague memory of someone called Jwara

in some faraway village...Toloki knew immediately that wealth had had the very strange effect of erasing from Nefolovhodwe's once sharp mind everything he used to know about his old friends back in the village. He wanted to turn his back and leave the disgusting man with his fleas. (129)

Obviously, the city has changed Nefolovhodwe as it will also have serious impact on the life of Toloki. Though he was offered a job as an investigator of tomb robbers, Toloki never had any sense of fulfilment in his new job. Instead he gets some valuable experience that sets him up as a professional mourner. Even Nefolovhodwe recognises this attribute in Toloki when he says:

Your face is a constant reminder that we all are going to die one day...he was going to make his face pay. After all, it was the only gift that God had given him. He was going to profit from the perpetual sadness that inhabited his eyes. The concept of a professional mourner was born. (133)

Despite the sad state of affairs we have noticed from the situation Toloki found himself, he still utilises the city's ambience to create an opportunity for his daily survival by becoming a professional mourner.

Contrast is also employed in *Ways of Dying* to juxtapose two different situations. For instance, in the story, the line of thinking which Toloki displays is a portrayal of the direct contrast between living in the rural space and living in the sort of urban space being used as the novel's setting as the inhabitants of the settlement display a strong united front which is what advances their progression as a community, and is also what allows them maintain any sort of claim over their urban space. The spatial behaviour of the female folk of Mda's settlement shows that this is precisely the philosophy which they adhere to. Toloki notices at the community meeting that "the people who are most active in the affairs of the settlement are the women. Not only do they do all the work, but they play leadership roles" (172). Their everyday movements reflect a certain confidence:

Toloki notices that in every shack they visit, the women are never still ... They are at the tap drawing water. They are washing clothes. They are sweeping the floor in their shacks, and the ground outside. They are closing holes in their shacks with cardboard and

plastic. They are loudly joking with their neighbours while they hang washing on the line. Or they are fighting with the neighbours about children who have beaten up their own children. They are preparing to go to the taxi rank to catch taxis to the city, where they will work in the kitchens of their madams.” (175)

The male folk in comparison “sit all day and dispense wide-ranging philosophies on how things should be” (175). The key, then, is in movement. This movement overrides the men’s “empty theories” (176), and forecasts the women’s positive march towards progressiveness. By this portrayal, the author instills more than a shred of hope in the reader that the urban settlement where the women find themselves in the novel will not always be in this poor deplorable state. This positive movement and mind set exuded by the female folk does seem to point to a more prosperous future for the settlement where it is entirely possible to find the basic amenities which make life in the urban areas distinct from life in the rural areas, amenities like: pipe-borne water, electricity, buildings which meet contemporary standards and relative security from their more immediate threat which are their fellow dwellers in neighbouring settlements.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined how the city is represented in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* and Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*. The common themes of violence, crime, sexuality and collapsing social and physical infrastructure run deep in the two novels. While it is possible to pontificate on the city as a locale or mere setting, our interest is predicated on previewing the city as the subject itself. This on its own is a new direction that seems to typify a paradigm shift from the norm whereby the city is host to the narrative. In this study, the city is treated as a subject. It is clear from the novels that a common thread runs through all the narratives. The city is inescapably positioned as the progenitor of the character make-up, plot alignment and thematic density, while the dynamics of the urban space influences how characters think. The social decadence in the modern city is the basis of the psychological dislocation that happens to characters in the novels. This paper, therefore, asserts that urbanity contributes to the shaping of the individual psyche of the characters in the stories. In this vein, the city becomes the subjective focus of the study rather than a marginal concept responsible for the moral degeneration of characters in African novels.



## Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth; Tiffin, Helen. "Post-Colonial Studies". *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd edition. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.
- Atta, Sefi. *Everything Good Will Come*. Northampton: Interlink, 2005.
- Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1999.
- Deranty, Jean-Phillipe. "Existentialist Aesthetics". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2009.
- Edensor, Tim and Mark Jayne (Ed.). *Urban Theory Beyond the West: A World of Cities*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Ehrkamp, Patricia. "Internationalizing Urban Theory: Toward Collaboration". *Urban Geography* (2011): 12-32.
- Mart, Cagri Tugrul. "Existentialism in Two Plays of Jean-Paul Sartre". *Journal of English and Literature* 3.3 (2012): 50-54
- McFarlane, Cohn. "The Comparative City: Knowledge, Learning, Urbanism". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34 (2010).
- Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. New York: Picador, 2007.
- Myers, Garth. *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*. New York: Zed Books, 2011.
- Nnodim Rita. "City, Identity and Dystopia: Writing Lagos in Contemporary Nigerian Novels". *Journal of Post Colonial Writing* 44.4 (2008): 321-332.
- Nuttall, Sarah. *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2009.
- Ouma Christopher. "Navigating the Lagos City Scape in Chris Abani's, *Graceland*". *Kunapipi* 34.1 (2012).
- Panza, Christopher and Gregory, Gale. *Existentialism for Dummies*. Indiana: Wiley Publishing, 2008.

Priest, Stephen. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Primorac, Ranka. "The Poetics of State Terror in Twenty-First Century Zimbabwe". *Interventions* 9.3 (2007): 434-50.

Robinson, Jennifer. *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London: Routledge, 2006.