

AFRREV IJAH  
An International Journal of Arts and Humanities  
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia  
Vol. 1 (4), November, 2012:1-12

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print)

ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

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**Nigerian Literature, Nationalism and the Experience of the  
African Diaspora: an Appraisal of Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's  
Tale***

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**Abstract**

*The crisis generated by people's dispersal to places outside their homeland has implications on both personal and national identities. This paper focuses on the literary trend in Nigeria reminiscent of works by African American and Caribbean writers who explored circumstances surrounding their compatriots in foreign countries from the 1950s to the present. The paper appraises Nigeria Diaspora literature using Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale**

*as a significant locus to explore the crises of nationalism and the frustrations which these exiles confront in their new homes.*

### **Introduction**

The classic cases of Diaspora are found in America where almost all Americans are originally from a country other than America. However, when mention is made of Diaspora with regards to America, attention is on the former African slaves who were forcibly taken to America and the Caribbean Islands. The term itself was first used in the *Septuagint* referring to the dispersion of the Jews: “esē diaspora en pasais basileias tēs gēs” which has been translated as “thou shalt be a dispersion [Diaspora] in all kingdoms of the earth”. With the passage of time the word became linked with the people of a particular nation living in other nations. The literary writing resulting from there is known as Diaspora literature. Diaspora in the sense used in this paper is referring to Africans sojourning in other nations for social, economic, political or religious reasons, and is used interchangeably with the immigrant.

African literature has imitated foreign literatures especially the British from which it evolved. However, the imitation has not been without discrimination. In terms of forms, it has developed along the genres of poetry, prose and drama. Its content on the other hand has taken its themes from the historical, economic and political developments on the continent. Writing on the novel, Ernest Emenyonu observes: “with the publication of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, the literary world woke up to a new invention – African dynamics in the art of the novel. The modern African novel which emerged in the middle of the twentieth century brought with it new motifs” (x). And one of such motifs that the African novel has fictionalised is the experience of the African immigrant as they seek greener pastures in foreign countries, albeit this subject, as Okonkwo notes, has been under-fictionalised (130). In view of this, and given the fact that this debut novel of Oguine’s has received little critical attention, this paper argues itself as necessary.

By far the most dramatic events that have affected the psyche of writers and citizenry in Nigeria and the African continent as a whole, has been colonialism and its aftermath. With the emergence of English, French and Spanish as official languages of African states, legacies bequeathed by the colonial powers, it followed that the literature could not retain a complete sense of independence. Politically, despite the enthronement of national

governments in former colonies, these governments failed to meet the varied expectations of their peoples: expectations of a better future of economic prosperity powered by education and political freedom. With the failure of governments caused by over dependence on mono crop economies tied to the apron strings of former colonial powers, most of the educated elites began to migrate to foreign countries bringing about the second wave of migrations especially to Britain and the United States America.

While some of those who left the shores of Nigeria became the bastions of the communities to which they moved, the transition was not so seamless for others. The distress of uprootment and transplantation are some of the major concerns which Nigerian authors residing abroad have sought to explore. Some of such writers who have sought to trace the process of integration are Buchi Emecheta, Isidore Okpewho, Sefi Atta, Helon Habila, Ike Oguine and Chimamanda Adichie. However, before we delve into Oguine's text selected for this paper, we would like to take a quick look at the definition of nationalism before proceeding. Nationalism is a multifaceted notion, but for the purpose of this discourse, let us content ourselves with Miscevic's definition which sees nationalism as "the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity..." (1). This definition presupposes an individual's affiliation to a nation-state either by birth or naturalisation, and such an individual's sense of attachment or loyalty to such a place. The issue of nationalism is interlocked with the subject of immigration in *A Squatter's Tale* such that it only appears logical to discuss the two issues hand in hand. The concern of this paper is to examine Nigerian literature, represented by Oguine's narrative, with the view of showing the relationships of the African migrant, their nationalist leanings, to their home country, Nigerian in particular, as they struggle with unfavourable conditions in their host countries. Before we continue, it is pertinent to give a synopsis of the novel at this juncture.

### **A Synopsis of a *Squatter's Tale***

Published in 2000, *A Squatter's Tale* is Ike Oguine's first novel. It details the rise to affluence, from a middle class family, of a young financier, Obi. His rise to affluence provides him with the necessities to live an exquisite life: fast cars, designer-suits, shoes and fragrances. And in spite of his long term relationship with his girlfriend, his life does not preclude philandering. In a bid to sustain his position as manager of Baobab Trust Finance House (BTF), the finance institution where he works, Obi goes to the extent of pimping for

Chief Sawa, an influential contractor who in return invests in the finance house. A sudden wind of economic distress blows over the finance sector leading to the collapse of several financial institutions, BTF inclusive. The executives of these institutions' being unable to face the crowd of customers demanding for their money flee abroad. Obi also flees to the US. Here, in sharp contrast to his life of affluence in Nigeria, he lives on the fringes as he struggles to make ends meet, in the wake of which his girlfriend of so many years in Nigeria jilts him and marries someone else. Obi is crushed but gathers himself together with the decision to strive to succeed and not return home a failure, in spite of the huge challenges that confront him in that foreign country.

### **Analysis**

As Omar Sougou observes, "African immigrants imagine or strive to preserve an identity with Africa, endeavouring likewise to keep alive the ties with the motherland and to come to terms with ambivalence" (13). Such an imagined or clear-cut strive to preserve an identity with Africa is evident in Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*, and this could be viewed as the nationalistic instincts, weak as they may be, still smouldering in spite of the factors that drove these immigrants from their fatherland Africa. While we may generally say that the nationalistic inclination of these immigrants is shown in *A Squatter's Tale* as weak, there is an undeniable, undying, even nostalgic tie of identity that they maintain with Africa (Nigeria in particular). As they confront the ugly realities of their host countries, they are reminded that they do not belong here, and though they hope to return to Africa someday, the decision to do that remains in some bleak, far away future. The reality is that they fear to retreat because of the decay that awaits them back at home. And in this sense, they bring to mind the Biblical stories of the hungry lepers who, fearing the hunger in the city made bold to enter the Aramean camp to seek a means of survival (2Kings 7:3-8).

While these Nigerians have some reasonable level of their African identity preserved, perhaps an instinctive attachment to one's home, they seem to bear grudges against that same home. These grudges account for their low level of nationalism. And these grudges arise mainly from the failure of the political, economic, and social systems and structures at home which drove them into exile. Obi for instance confesses a hatred for his country when he is frustrated by the poor communication system there which would not allow him to make a call he urgently wants to make:

I dialled Robo's number... I dialled it several times but the call didn't go through, then the next time I dialled a recorded voice came on – *All trunks lines are busy, please try later*. That response to an international call must be unique to **my wretched country, I thought bitterly**. I didn't know a lot about how telephone systems worked, but I couldn't understand how any part of the globe, even the poorest of the poor, the least developed country in the world by all indices, would have difficulty in connecting a call that had been made from thousands of miles away, how a country would be so inefficient that all its 'trunks' would be busy. **I hated my country that afternoon more than I've ever hated it;** more, I'm sure, than I would ever hate it again. (Emphasis added 10)

The quotation shows the immigrants frustration at the crumbling state of his home nation, which accounts for his hatred for it, and in consequence, a low or absolute lack of nationalistic yearning. It is common with most of the immigrants to exhibit such a low sense of nationalism for the reasons already averred. They are indeed, always comforted to hear bad news about Nigeria because it helps them to justify their actions, to satisfy their consciences that they made the right decision in leaving Nigeria. The case of the four taciturn men in Uncle Happiness's apartment comes to mind:

I know that for those who have gone away bad news of home is in a sense good news, for each time they hear of worsening economic desperation, armed robberies and assassinations and political crises they are reassured that they were right to leave, that whatever frustrations and humiliations that they have to face in the strange land are well worth it. If home is such a terrible place you may even manage to hold homesickness at bay a little. So I obliged them with the necessary horror stories. There was hardly any need to make up anything, for the country I had left the day before was a pretty rotten place.....My listeners shook their heads in amazement and duly exclaimed their horror; one was so grateful he went and bought a six-pack of Heineken for me from a store down the road. (110)

Their country is pretty rotten, and it appears that their sense of nationalism rots away with it. Nevertheless, when confronted with the ugly realities of their new home, they long in their hearts for their fatherland, even though they cannot turn back. Ego for instance wants to return to Nigerian when she faces discrimination. Her husband too confesses to encountering some form of racial discrimination and promises to return to Nigeria and even involve actively in the politics there, but he never does.

Like the Caribbean Diaspora or even the freed slaves in America, most of the Nigerian immigrants had hoped for a better life in their new homes. Generally, most of those who fled Nigeria for foreign countries especially to Britain and America, had sought a new life or what is generally known as greener pastures or the Golden Fleece. This is not surprising as historically, colonialism and the European propaganda had advertised the colonial powers as epicentres of civilization. Thus, for most of the earlier immigrants, the sojourn was for self-improvement. In the case of Caribbean countries, this issue is captured for instance in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, while the Nigerian case is attested to by Buchi Emechata whose desire for freedom and empowerment through education is documented in *Second Class Citizen*. While these immigrants had problems such as racism and problems of adjustment, some of them found it easy to integrate and change their status through education.

In contrast to the first wave immigrations, the second wave was disappointing. As Ike Oguine observes:

For many of the Nigerian immigrants of my generation that I knew, coming to America was not so positively transformative. Many of these immigrants were people with middleclass backgrounds and sensibilities – lawyers, doctors, university teachers, or children of these – who were forced to lead a working class and marginal existence upon arrival in America. Immigration was therefore, for them, at least initially, a fall in status and the experience was to some extent embittering. And many of them carried, at least initially, [a] sense of injury. (qtd in Okonkwo 130)

Three issues emerge from the above statements which are worth emphasising. Firstly, rather than immigration enhancing the status of the immigrant, it debased it. As he observes, the second wave immigrants were of middleclass backgrounds but their translocation reduced them to the dregs

of their new homelands. Secondly, this debasement or denigration caused them to be bitter. And lastly, this bitterness created a sense of injury. These three issues are issues that would impact on individuals personal and national identities. This is because the joy and sense of anticipation which the myth of America as the land of hope especially as enunciated in its constitution were often dashed by the actual reality. Thus, for such immigrants, having been let down by a home country that could not cater for their needs while being unable to gain integration in their new home, was frustrating. At the personal level we read in *A Squatter's Tale* of characters like Happiness and the four big, taciturn men in his apartment. The description of the apartment reveals how far they have fallen:

The brown sofa on which I sat was a massive semi-circle; it took up more than two-thirds of the living room, but each thread on it sagged as though someone had painstakingly pulled on every one of them...Someone had taken a sharp object and made marks all over the cabinet. Rusted cassette decks, amplifiers and turntables were piled on it in no particular order, like junk. In the centre was an ancient 26-inch TV which surprisingly showed bright pictures, but you couldn't hear what was being said because of a constant vicious hiss that came from the back of it. The walls of the living room, originally painted white, suffered from a spreading spotted grey eczema...A fierce smell, an oppressive compound of cigarette smoke and frying oil, sweat and damp, decay and despair ruled the room. (10)

The whole page is dedicated to a description of the decaying state of the room and the dilapidated furniture in it, which one imagines, cannot be worse than what these immigrants had left behind. It is not a wonder then that these men are morose. They have no reason to feel excited. As Obi describes them, "they materialised without warning" (11) giving them a ghost-like appearance and existence. Although we are not told of their lifestyles in Nigeria before they came to America, it could not have been more deprived than it was in the United States. While Uncle Happiness' case could be understood because of his self-confessed lack of education, "my greatest problem in this country is that I did not go to school for very long. That's why things have sometimes been difficult for me" (23); the case of Obi is not the same. Before the collapse of the finance house where he worked, Obi had been living well. But here in America he falls into hard times despite his high

level of education. One of the problems he is confronted with is that having come into the country illegally, he cannot legitimately acquire a job. He is an example of what is known as an 'illegal alien'. So even the job he gets is one that would not call attention to him; he is employed as a security guard without questions being asked because he is one of the cheap sources of labour in a country where the cost of labour is high. As it quickly becomes evident to Obi, the US dollar is more important than the level of his education. As Mozer of the Bay Area Corporate Security declares:

I want you at work on time. I don't want complaints from the other guys about your attitude. I got a lot of those about the Nigerians who worked here before. They had been to college back there in Nigeria and they thought they were too important for the job, but they were not too important for the pay. (51)

In contrast to his lifestyle in Lagos, the above excerpt is a clear indication of the demotion which he is not left to bemoan in peace. In fact, it is as though Mr. Mozer takes a fiendish pleasure in reminding him of his fall from 'grace to grass' as the cliché goes.

The crisis of expectation which the immigrant faces in *A Squatter's Tale* reminds one of what happens to Selvon's characters in *The Lonely Londoners*. This novel is recognised as a classic tale of the Trinidadian vernacular and representation of the migrant's experience, and has much in common with Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*. While the reasons for Selvon's importance as a novelist are not very crucial here, the fact that Oguine, writing almost fifty years after the West Indian, offers no hope of return for the exile irrespective of his travail is telling. Even for the West Indian exiles, most of whom were semi-literate or even illiterate; their predicament was predicated on economic conditions at home. For the Nigerians, even those who are well educated are badly treated and find no succour anywhere; not at home or even abroad. This is because the economic models recommended to developing nations and adopted by them have failed. Consequently, professionals such as Vivian and Doctor Ezendu have to fare abroad. But here in America, despite their wealth and comfort they remain unsatisfied and bitter, as the narrator observes in talking about Dr. Ezendu:

... he looked like a man who had knife wounds that were forever deepening. The contrast between his big beautiful house, his young beautiful wife, his stash of money, all his



wonderful possessions and this squalid comprehensive bitterness was startling. And I wondered: wasn't this kind of success supposed to free one, at least in part, from that kind of bitterness? (128).

Success did not free the immigrant from bitterness and disappointment. Several reasons account for this. First, as Ezenwa states "it gets tougher every day...This country [America] makes you a man. You can live in Nigeria all you life and live like a child, never be challenged for once, but when you get to America, it begins to test you from the moment you step off the plane'" (125-6). One of the challenges that confront or test them upon stepping off the plane is racism. Just like the racism complained about by Selvon's characters, Ike Oguine's characters experience the same discrimination despite their education. So, in spite of the decades between when Selvon wrote his classic and Oguine's, the same things apparently have remained unchanged as Ezenwa narrates to Obi:

When I was working in LA...a white woman was brought in for emergency surgery and I was checking her in with a young white doctor who worked under me. This woman said, right there in front of me, that she hoped they were not going to let me into the room when she was being operated on. I was the best surgeon in that hospital by a mile. (127)

This confirms the unchanging face of racism in America and, of course, constitutes one of the reasons for the personal despair of professionals in America. Notwithstanding their contributions to the country and the heights they have achieved in their professions, American racism is still a brick wall they have not been able to scale. Part of the reason for such a jaundiced view by the people is the issue of stereotyping. Thus to the whites, all blacks are ignorant and criminals, to all blacks, whites are racist and have supercilious attitudes, while immigrant-Africans like Ezenwa regard Black Americans as "...lazy, dishonest, dissolute, grasping; in short they had all the vices known to mankind and apparently not a virtue" (126). Apart from racism, non participation in the political process and powerlessness, cause these immigrants, especially those who expect better treatment from their country of adoption, to feel alienated. In an attempt to participate in the political system, Ezenwa arranges for a Republican politician, Prime, to interact with them. He holds very high expectations for the meeting, as the narrator tells us

“for Ezendu this was meant to be a first step on the ladder to acquiring political influence, maybe even public office” (129), for Prime it is not. While Ezendu declares his unflinching loyalty to America and desire to participate in its politics, Prime’s non-committal grunts or stony silence continually shuts the door against him. Obi’s assessment of the situation as well as his analogy sums up the whole interaction: “I noticed that Ogbu looked rather uneasy... I suspected that he wasn’t sure this dabbling in American politics was a good idea. It might have seemed to him like telling a man who has generously given you a roof over your head that you wanted to sleep with his wife” (134-5).

The adeptness with which Prime bluffs them and their attempt at integration shows that even though the idiom used above may not have been known to him, the sentiment he shares relates to it. Individually, the group of immigrants may have fulfilling lives, though alienated, but as a group they are certainly completely alienated. For others like Ego, Obi and Vivian the loneliness is almost unbearable. For the last two, this is probably because they have no life outside their work. Ego’s case is even worse as she has no job to keep her busy. She therefore, makes up for her loneliness with watching soap operas and talk shows, and shopping sprees. While she wishes she could leave for Nigeria and even Ezendu promises to go back, the reality is that there is nothing to go back to. Their dilemma is graphically captured by Obi:

America was all around me, immense, indifferent, frightening but also incredibly varied, challenging... Though inside it, I had remained at the margins – for the previous year I really hadn’t been living in America but in a sort of halfway country, a sort of satellite life outside the life that went on, tenuously linked to the American way of life by work and a common currency, shops and television. Now, though I would always be in a sense apart from it, always be more Nigerian than American, I also had to strive for a place inside it; I had to find a way to be both apart from and part of this vast country. (196)

The above concession coming from a person who had left all to come to America, the land of ‘milk and honey’ only to be confronted by various rebuffs both at the individual and group level represents the squatter’s lot – living on the land by the owner’s whims and caprices but also earning your

livelihood so that an attempt at leaving is not to be contemplated even though ownership of that land is what one ultimately hopes for. Even in the above statement Obi does not contemplate a return to Nigeria, just as even Ego and Ezendu would never actualize it. The explanation for such a love-hate relationship between the immigrant, his host community and the homeland he has left can be ascribed to the difficulties or obstacles that push them almost to a state of frustration in both homeland and their host community.

It has been the view of some persons that the presence of the immigrants in the First World is a pointer to the collapse of nation-state; however, Shalini Puri's assessment of the situation is quite apt:

Despite the increasing mobility of people across national borders, it is worth remembering that only about 2.5% of the world's population migrates across national boundaries. Contrary to those who invoke the appearance of "the Third World in the belly of the First" as a sign of the demise of nation-state, center, and periphery, I suggest that those migration to the First World testify to the continuation, and possibly the intensification, of national inequalities – inequalities which only a tiny fraction of the world's population can attempt to mitigate by migration. To declare these migrations evidence, therefore, of the transcendence of the nation-state risks abandoning the urgent task of social and economic reconstruction of peripheral states. (qtd in Donnell 79)

Puri's observation is significant because as the case in *A Squatter's Tale* proves, the migration of people from Nigeria shows they are pushed into exile by economic and political issues which can be addressed if adequate attention is given to issues of good governance. And again, if we consider the inequalities and alienation they face in their countries of exile, the idea of the collapse of nation-state becomes all the more questionable. Rather than see the migrations as a pointer to collapsing boundaries, migrations ought to be seen as a symptom of the disease and appropriate measures should be taken to cure the malaise. Lastly, rather than gain integration and acceptance, migrants are forever outsiders; even those who get green cards for instance are only partially accepted. Judging from the stipulation of the American constitution that only children born within it can aspire to the highest political office in the land, and the 'birth' controversy that has trailed Barack

Obama's election to that office, then those excited by 'demise of nation-state, centre, and periphery' are merely suffering from delusions.

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