

# Transnational Migration, Identity, and the African Literary Experience

Kabir Ahmed

## Abstract

*This essay seeks to examine transnational migration by looking primarily at 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers historicizing the concept of the 'post-colonial' and pointing to its development as captured in their writing. In the paper, transnational migration is viewed as the movement of persons across national boundaries where the migrants live their lives across borders, participating simultaneously in social relations that embed them in more than one nation-state, and in which there is a process by which such immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. Going by this definition, all major African writers (such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, and the like), with the possible exception of Ayi Kwei Armah, are transmigrants. This is because their migration took place—is taking place—within fluid social spaces and identity-forming contexts, which are constantly reworked through their simultaneous connectedness to more than one society. In this case, the term that better expresses this situation is 'post-colonial'. Although there is a growing community of African writers and artists living in the West, it is uncertain how they might influence the events, politics, and cultural discussions within their original homeland. The conclusion is that it is not clear how the transmigration of African intellectuals could help shape the identity and tenor of the post-colonial African literary experience, which has been historically and culturally shaped by the impact of the African colonial experience. In this sense, then, recent migration by the African literati (specifically novelists) to the West is only the latest version of the pull that Europe and the United States of America exert on African post-colonial identity. This is not likely to slow down in the foreseeable future.*

These days, a recurring theme in the news bulletins of the leading news networks such as the BBC, CNN, and Aljazeera is the plight of mostly young men and women, sometimes whole families, fleeing from Africa to Europe through Italy, Spain, and Greece, sometimes with tragic consequences. In the African side of the story, the migrants are, according to reports (such as that of Ben Okri), mostly fleeing economic hardship, failing economies, and decaying infrastructure in their countries. The migrants hope to find or start a better life in Europe. Some four hundred years ago, Europeans were forcibly taking Africans to work in the Americas and some parts of Europe such as Britain and France—in the former, on plantations, and in the latter, as domestic workers and servants. In other contexts, whole societies were forced to move for several reasons: for new environments, new food sources, and other resources. In this sense, migration has always been a feature of human societies, and it is not likely to stop with the rise of the nation-state, which has explicit geographical and territorial claims. Thus there can be no isolation in the globalized world, despite claims about the decline of the nation-state and corresponding arguments for the transnational context of migration. Transnational migration involves people that have migrated across borders from one nation-state to another and who live their lives across borders, participating simultaneously in social relations that embed them in more than one nation-state. One can see immediately that this process has been going on for decades, and that virtually all the most influential African writers have been trans migrants, as can be seen in the American and British adopted homes of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nurudin Farah, and lately, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helon Habila. Perhaps a better way of conceptualizing this historical relationship is to underscore the African literary experience's essentially postcolonial provenance. On the one hand, most ordinary Africans who live in the West were unwilling to give up their traditional identities or cultural links with their original homeland. On the other hand, most African writers want to write about their homeland while also living in the West or Western academies, mostly as cultural or political émigrés and exiles.

African literature thus becomes inextricably linked with the global concern for the large-scale displacement of African peoples from their homelands to the West and the Americas. Such

concern for migration and the ensuing transnationalism is an inescapable responsibility for African writers of all shades: diasporic or home-based. For as long as literature remains largely conceived as intensely concerned about the conditions and interests of humanity. In keeping with this thought, both Laila Lalami, the Moroccan-American novelist, and author of *Hopes and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, and the Nigerian immigrant writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of the novel *Americanah*, continued African writers' traditional engagement with the questions of migration, transnational mobility, and citizenship that had preoccupied African literature since the emergence of postcolonial conflict. The vigor with which both female writers attacked the travails of African migrants in the Western world—and this includes the United States of America—gave fresh impetus and new perspective to the psycho-social, political, and economic challenges faced by African migrants. Adichie particularly deplors the extreme, if specious, racism which the African émigré faces from both Whites and African Americans alike. In the long run, Adichie, through her protagonist Ifemelu, hints at the possibility of return to the homeland, a sort of reversed migration, as the ultimate resolution of the dilemma of the African émigré.

### **The Transnational Context of the Modern World**

One of the enduring facts of modern life is the interpellation of every person on this planet as the bearer of national identity. Yet nationalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, with its roots generally traced to the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> However, Simon During places the legitimation of the nation-state in the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> This complex process crystallized with the development of capitalism, or what Benedict Anderson calls “print capitalism”: a process in which the rising middle class played a decisive role in creating national states. According to Anderson, “print capitalism . . . quickly created large new reading publics—not least among merchants and women who typically knew no Latin—and mobilized them for politico-religious purposes.”<sup>3</sup> He argues further that the growth of national consciousness, especially in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, mainly became possible because of a “half fortuitous but explosive interaction between a system of production and productive relations

(capitalism), a technology of communication (print) and the fatality of human linguistic diversity.”<sup>4</sup> Anderson’s “reading publics” had historically been the readers of novels such as Defoe’s *Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, and novels of Walter Scott and Honoré de Balzac. These novels, argue Franco Moretti, made possible the “Golden Century of the Western narrative.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, what led to the creation of the first nations was the conjunction of novel-writing, print capitalism, productive relations and reading publics composed of “families of ruling classes, of nobility and landed gentry, countries and ecclesiastics, rising middle strata of plebian lay officials, professionals, and commercial and industrial bourgeoisie.” Moreover, once established, new ones could be imagined based on “giving a printed form to languages.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Anderson, this development led to new solidarity based on an “essentially imagined basis.”<sup>7</sup> The subsequent expansion of European capital to the colonies through colonial conquest consolidated what may be called “national print media”; namely the novel. The novel was central to the definition and consolidation of the nation both as an “imagined community” and as a universal model for state and bureaucratic organization:

The rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature. On the other hand, modern nationalism’s political tasks directed the course of literature, leading through the Romantic concepts of folk character’ and national Language to the (mostly illusory) divisions of literature into distinct kinds of literature. On the other hand, and just as fundamentally, literature participated in the formation of nations by creating ‘national print media’—the newspaper and the novel.<sup>8</sup>

In England, the idea of the nation had had deep roots in the ideology of Anglo-Saxonism, itself beginning at the Restoration of 1660. It was the idea that the Anglo-Saxon people were a naturally freedom-loving people. As Reginald Horsman shows in *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of Anglo-Saxonism*, nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonism was dependent on the identification of race, nationality, and literature; Language and nation.

This is evident in Martin Tupper's poem, "The Anglo-Saxon Race," in which Tupper constructed the so-called Anglo-Saxon race as the abiding core of the English nation. Similar sentiment undergirds Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature*. He traced the origins of English literature not to Greek classics, as it was commonly assumed, but to *Beowulf*—universally considered in English literary history as the "finest surviving long poem in Old English," the Anglo-Saxon tongue. The same sentiment was expressed by the Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott in the preface to his novel, *Ministrelty of the Scottish Border*, in which he sees England, his country's ally, as possessing "peculiar features . . . and manners and character." In 1831, Thomas Carlyle wrote: "The history of a nation's poetry is the essence of its history."<sup>9</sup>

Thus for Tupper and Carlyle, the nation was the center around which race, nationality, and literature (poetry) converged. In this ideology, the English, for example, were a distinct nationality, with a shared and a collective true self, because they shared a common civilization and a common language.

As Horsman and Anderson observe, the modern European nations' political geography did not correspond to actual nationalities that forced nationalist philosophers such as Carlyle to see in a common language and literature the abiding core of the German and English nations respectively. Paradoxically, this is also the view of Frantz Fanon, who, despite his anti-colonial politics, sees, in his own words, "the oral tradition—stories, epics, and songs of the people [as helping to shape] the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons."<sup>10</sup>

### **Identity, Transnational Migration, and Border Crossing**

Identity of any sort— national, religious, ethnic, cultural, or gender— implies a subject's, a human being's, *imaginary* relation to her conditions of existence. The stress on the word *imaginary* is intended to indicate the fluidity, the unlimited possibilities, and the shifting nature of identity. It is also to emphasize that the human subject's relation to herself and others is always mediated by her relation to herself (as a self). Now this is because reality (that which exists outside the self—the enduring facts and materiality of the natural-physical-cultural world) is not ultimately the

expression of the self, or reducible to the self's definition (of itself as an agent-in-itself).

Any given person has some distinct and mutually conflicting identities, which, in the last analysis, constitute and reconstitute that person. As Goran Therborn puts it, a "single human being may act as an almost unlimited number of subjects, and in the course of a single human life a large number of subjectivities are acted out. . . . A given human being usually has several subjectivities."<sup>11</sup> That precisely is what makes identity in itself not only difficult to define but also a veritable metaphor for migration; that is, it is always shifting, crossing the demarcated borders of the self and the realities outside the self.

Perhaps there is no such thing as identity-in-itself but as a process *connected* to, or *complement*, a condition, situation, or states of affairs. Hence, we speak of cultural, ethnic, or racial identity as a position of *enunciation*, as positioned and positional. This is because an important part of the meaning of identity for humans is their situation, past performance and social recognition. Erikson defines identity as "a defined world image."<sup>12</sup> For Oring Elliot, identity refers to "that sense of space-time connection with states, thoughts and actions from the past."<sup>13</sup>

Stuart Hall defines identity as a position of articulation, as the plural and different ways human subjects are positioned by, and their positioning within, the narratives of the past. Thus for Hall, identity is a *production* which, however, is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."<sup>14</sup> Thus identity is by nature plural: any identity has its other side, its *aporias*, ruptures, and discontinuities. In this framework, identity, like history, culture, and memory, is always constituted in and by narrative, or what Hall calls the representation of the self in diverse contexts.

In some sense, then, identity prefigures migration in the present transnational situation in which we find ourselves. According to Ernest Gellner, "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist."<sup>15</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger take up the idea of a nation as an invention in their path-breaking book, *The Invention of Tradition*. They argue that a decisive factor in the construction of inclusive national communities (citizens sharing the same national identity) is what they call an "invented tradition," namely "a set of practices . . . of a ritual

or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”<sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger argue further that “modern nations generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely rooted human communities so “natural” as to require no definition other than self-assertion.”<sup>17</sup> This fits with Benedict Anderson’s celebrated definition of nations as “imagined communities.”

The central argument, then, is that national identity has to draw on narrativization: there is hardly any human culture without its stories of myths of origin (of the world and its ethnic or cosmic identity), what Miller calls “habits of storytelling,”<sup>18</sup> its folk heroes and legends. It seems that narration is natural, universal, and, perhaps, insidious to the same degree. Insidious because it makes things happen with a vengeance. This *performative* power of narrative closely resembles the workings of identity in that, like personal or collective identity, it makes *something* happen. Narration strives for *unity* and *economy* in its effort to create order in the world. This is why stories and their telling, or the act of narration itself *creates* its subject matter. That is, no event exists in itself; it is its telling, or the act of its *telling*, which makes it happen. In this particular case, a story, and its telling, have created an identity. However, it is the story itself that *is* this identity, for it is its telling which has ordered, re-ordered, recounted, and re-told the priorities of a historically-specific community, and a collective self. Re-told repeatedly, and diffused within the community, the story becomes, in effect, the *affirmation* and *reinforcement* of a community’s basic assumptions, selfhood, and destiny in the world. Thus, narration is “one of the most powerful, perhaps *the* most powerful ways to assert the basic ideology of [a] culture.”<sup>19</sup> It is also how a self produces an identity for itself, or rather a way by which a culture, a symbolic economy, constructs for an “I” a (more or less) definite self and a definite role in the world. Nevertheless, it is also true that narratives also put in question the priorities of culture, although, as Miller argues, the “putting in question may be obliquely affirmative.”<sup>20</sup>

### **African Literary Experience and Postcolonial Nationalism**

Just as Western literati such as Matthew Arnold and I. A. Richards sought to use literature to cure the ills of society, so postcolonial

intellectuals have sought to use literature both as a signifier for the nation and as an index of what Benita Parry<sup>21</sup> and Neil Lazarus<sup>22</sup> call “nationalist discourses of resistance” and “nationalitarianism (or insurgent nationalism)” respectively. Drawing upon Fanon, Parry and Lazarus argue for a distinction between imperialist nationalism: the West’s appropriative nationalism based on imperialist conquest and economic exploitation, and the anti-imperialist nationalism predicated on *separation* from a colonial power or oriented towards that end. This position is also argued by Partha Chatterjee,<sup>23</sup> the author of an influential study of post-colonial nationalism, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986). Fanon had written that national culture was “the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created and keeps itself in existence.”<sup>24</sup>

Briefly, post colonial intellectuals believe that nationalism in the context of anti-colonialism is bound to be progressive, that is, obliged to transcend the narrow aims of classical or imperialist nationalism, namely the consolidation of an appropriative order. In the words of Chatterjee, anti-colonial “nationalist thinking is necessarily a struggle with an entire body of systematic knowledge” that it seeks to undermine, subvert, and challenge—that given its origins in the post-colony, insurgent nationalism is also, Lazarus emphasizes, “a positive discourse which seeks to replace the structure of colonial power with a new order, that of national power.” Finally, they argue, a progressive “national bourgeoisie” should speak for the nation, as the examples of Fidel Castro, Amílcar Cabral, Nelson Mandela, and Ho Chi Minh have shown. As Fanon<sup>25</sup> writes, Third World national liberation or decolonization “sets out to change the order of the world.” To be sure, Fanon’s vision of national culture and nationalism is unabashedly *literary*:

The crystallisation of the national consciousness will disrupt literary styles and themes and create a completely new public. While at the beginning, the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether intending to charm him or of denouncing him through unethical or subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his people. . . . It is only from that moment that we can speak of national

literature. Hence there is at the level of creation, the taking up and clarification of typically nationalist themes.

Inspired by Fanon's views cited above, Lazarus<sup>26</sup> concludes: "a certain nationalism *is* fundamental to the 'Third World'" because, he argues further, it is "only on the inherited terrain of the *nation* that an articulation between secular intellectualism and popular consciousness can be forged."

It is arguably true that the nation is central to the literary praxis of distinguished postcolonial novelists such as Achebe, Ngugi, and Salman Rushdie. Historically, postcolonial narratives have been produced in the dialectical space of contestation between nation and cultural identity. Take the example of Achebe and Rushdie, for whom the English language, or writing in the langue, is a necessary discursive formation.

In his famous 1964 essay "The African Writer and the English Language," Achebe<sup>27</sup> seeks to re-occupy the space of the English language (a displaced metaphor for nation and ethnicity), which he sees as vital and necessary, which he must use because, he says, it has been "given to him."<sup>28</sup>

Achebe even credits the English language with giving Africans a "tongue" with which to communicate among themselves, and a nation-state, what he calls "big political units" in place of the messy pre-colonial situation in which vast empires co-existed with "tiny village entities."<sup>29</sup> Achebe is also emphatic that "African unity" is possible only based on a much-reduced number of languages for Africans to talk/speak in: "English, French, and Arabic."<sup>30</sup> Finally, Achebe's "ethnic nationalism" comes through in his passionate support for the Biafran cause, which he re-invents as a "revolutionary struggle . . . for justice and true independence," and what, he contends, African literature should be about — "right and just causes."<sup>31</sup> Something similar may be said about the émigré writer Rushdie, who seeks, in his words, to "carve out large territories within the [English] language." In his *Imaginary Homelands* (note the metaphor), he contends that "in the forging of British Indian identity the English Language is of central importance. *It must, in spite of everything, be embraced*" (my emphasis). As Ngugi points out, this conception of national identity *vis à vis* the English language is a feature of a whole generation of African writers from Achebe to Meja Mwangi.

Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) vigorously contests this conflation of English and African identity, which, he thinks, disadvantaged native African languages. He is sharply critical of Achebe's confidence that the English language is capable of "carrying the weight" of the African experience. However, it should be "a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home [Britain] but altered to suit its new African surroundings."<sup>32 33</sup> This explains Ngugi's decision to write in his native Gikuyu language. However, Ngugi's prose is itself much like Johann Herder's, resonant with the narrative uses of a nation and nationalist problematics. In "Towards a National Culture," written under the influence of Fanon, Ngugi looks forward to the day when Africans would "achieve *true national cultures*" in their fight against capitalism, which, Ngugi continues, has done so much harm to Africa, and *dwarfed our total creative spirit*.<sup>34</sup> And in *Decolonising the Mind*, he endorses the anti-colonial struggles of "patriotic students, intellectuals . . . soldiers and other progressive elements of the petty middle class" and the "patriotic defense of the peasant/worker roots of national cultures, their defense of the democratic struggle in all the nationalities inhabiting the same territory," and finally, the "space [that] makes the national heritage."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, "the nation" and its cultural and literary prerequisites loom large in *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood*, and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

Thus, as Guha argues, the national bourgeoisie fails to speak for the nation, the postcolonial writer fashions and articulates a *national* narrative of postcolonial identity.<sup>36</sup> That is why postcolonial narrative's social mission has to be either national liberation or cultural self-reinterpretation.

However, things are not this uncomplicated. In truth, "the nation" is a hotly contested term within postcolonial literature. In the novels of Achebe, Ngugi, Ousmane, and Farah, the nation is also an absent cause, present in its absence; it has disappeared or has failed to *appear*. As a displaced version of the nation, the African novel, far from being an insurgent metaphor for national liberation, is an allegory for its *failure* to provide a coherent and cohesive cultural-national identity. It is in this sense that the African novel is and becomes an "imagined nation":

Because the state which must transform the postcolonial territories into “nations” are . . . already bequeathed, and sitting upon seething disparities of class and background, the problem for the neocolonial writers has not only been to create the aura of national community eroded by the “monopolization of the forms of cultural expression” in the dominant culture, but to expose the excesses which the *a priori* state, chasing a national identity after the fact, has created at home.

In Africa, the nation-state (organized around a repressive bureaucratic construction of citizenship and the military) and the novel (as an imagined nation and as surrogate colonial modernity) have not peacefully or cooperatively co-existed. Thus a key feature of the postcolonial intelligentsia is *exile*. One only needs to mention Ngugi, Farah, and Dennis Brutus to underscore this. Many others went on (more or less) voluntary exile: Achebe, Ben Okri, and Rushdie. Whether an exile or an émigré, the African writer’s encounter with the nation (with nationalism or the nation’s philosophy as a fund of narrative or as a constructed identity) has been particularly ironic. The theme of the nation in African narrative is a metaphor of the contradictions of national identification and nationhood, nation-forming and literary production. It has been argued, for example by Hall, that in the postcolonial world, a nation is a place, a narrative of fulfillment and conflict; it has given writers and intellectuals an “imaginary plentitude,” a fount of symbolic representation, “the infinitely renewable source of desire,” and the reservoir of political and economic conflict and contestation.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Dipesh Chakrabarty<sup>38</sup> has pointed to the contemporary Third World (his preferred term) nationalism’s collaborative venture with modern imperialism. According to this view, the modernizing narratives of citizenship and the nation-state which one finds in African novelists and politicians alike amply demonstrate that both modernity and the nation-state are grounded epistemologically and politically in an imaginary renaissance of the past, and ambivalences and contradictions of narrations of modernity and nation themselves.

Thus, Fanon’s vision of an insurgent national liberation led by “the people,” and Lazarus and Guha’s nationalitarianism (revolutionary nationalism), have been realized not in the very class on which they have fixed their gaze—the so-called national bourgeoisie—but in novelists, poets, and playwrights. For the major

political theorists, politicians, and philosophers of the African continent are also novelists, poets, and playwrights: Senghor, Fanon, Cabral, Mandela, Neto, Michel, Nyerere, Achebe, Farah, Ousmane, Ngugi, Mahfouz, and Kaunda.

### **The Postcolonial African Literary Experience**

The story told by Achebe of his need to “write back” to the colonizer, or rather to one particular denigrating representation of the “African” by Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson*,<sup>39</sup> and his need to do better than Amos Tutuola, the author of *Palm-Wine Drinkard*<sup>40</sup> is well known within academic literary circles.<sup>41</sup> For a host of literary critics such as David Carroll,<sup>42</sup> Catherine Innes,<sup>43</sup> and Simon Gikandi,<sup>44</sup> the defining empirical and cultural experience of Nigerian or African writing is the encounter with colonialism, so that the central paradigm of African writing or literature is “writing or answering back” to the Empire—as Salman Rushdie memorably said, “The empire writes back to the centre.” According to Williams,<sup>45</sup> this “deliberate revisionist strategy adopted by Achebe” is one of the defining features of all properly postcolonial writing.”

The full implication of this view is that African literature’s defining identity is also colonialism that the literature responds to, whether in critique or paradigm. Of course, many African writers, including Achebe himself, have been critical of Nigeria’s postcolonial experiences, leadership, the nation, and cultural and political institutions. Nevertheless, the point is that for many an African writer, it is the colonial historical past that is still the dominant cultural experience. Thus, in this “prison-house of the (post-)colonial,” African literature has more or less functioned as a humanistic-moral handmaiden—as a moral indictment of the national leadership, whether military or civilian. Whatever the case, Nigerian literature in all its forms is preoccupied with Nigerian modernity and its promises and threats, from the persistence of communalist-culturalist values of identity and the deepening crises of urban living, to rural poverty and deepening national maladies such as corruption, religious politics, and ethnic jingoism.

It is also the case that Nigerian literature cannot afford to be kept in perpetual thrall to the so-called “postcolonial” paradigm, even though the postcolonial in the Nigerian situation will be present in a long time to come. A fruitful area for a new

beginning is the textual representation of the other: women. For just as Nigerian writers would resent being represented in negative terms by Western writers and literary institutions, Nigerian women also “are not happy about having their role as speaking subjects usurped by men.”<sup>46</sup> This asymmetrical relationship of men and women indicates the extent to which the postcolonial is more the name of a problem than of a finished revolution in the efforts of Nigerian writers to “write back” to the colonial oppressors or the indigenous postcolonial agents of oppression.

### **The Myth of the Diaspora and “African Literature”**

It is, of course, the case, as we have seen above, that Nigerian writers have sought to use literature to criticize the direction of the Nigerian establishment and society as a whole. They have also used literature as a signifier for the nation and as an index of what Benita Parry calls “nationalist discourses of resistance”<sup>47</sup> and what Neil Lazarus calls “nationalitarianism (or insurgent nationalism),”<sup>48</sup> as can be seen from the universal criticism of military rule in many Nigerian literary productions.

Indeed, Azevedo<sup>49</sup> and Manning<sup>50</sup> suggest that indigenous African—in this case, Nigerian—cultural productions can be rejuvenated through contact with the African diaspora. But how would this be relevant to the development of Nigerian literature, for example? For one, there is not one unified but many disparate African diasporas; there are those who want to maintain links with their ancestral African home, those who have been assimilated in the host country, those who still harbor hopes of a return, as well as economic migrants who have left Africa for good, who see Africa as the blighted land.<sup>51</sup>

It is not expected that Nigerian writers would echo the themes and literary problematics of diasporic writers, given that both groups face almost completely different situations. A further argument is that literary production does not necessarily follow empirical economic and technological exchange lines.

Thus it is not easy to see in clear terms the precise ways in which the so-called African diaspora can engage in a productive literary exchange with Nigerian writers. Furthermore, why should the concerns of a Nigerian writer living in New York be directly relevant to the literary concerns of a Nigerian poet living

in Maiduguri today? This is the case despite the argument of Lazarus<sup>52</sup> that the African countries' structural problems, inherited from the colonial past, account for "the problematic of post-colonialism." Even though the African diaspora is, in the last analysis, the creation of colonial history, and thus a postcolonial predicament, it does not follow that writers in the African diaspora should be a veritable model for Nigerian writers.

Perhaps the idea of borrowing from the diaspora means taking inspiration from diaspora writers such as Ben Okri and Harry Garuba, who have Nigerian ancestry but live outside the country. Interestingly, some African diasporic writers, such as the Moroccan-American novelist Laila Lalami and the Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie, realizing the futility of their literary exploits outside the African shore in relation to their relevance to the cultural well-being of their ancestral African home, have begun to tilt their works towards a return home as the ultimate solution to their disconnection from the true African realities. Though Lalami's *Hopes and Other Dangerous Pursuits*<sup>53</sup> resonates with the usual excuses for Africans' migration to the West, it is nonetheless strongly suggestive of the illogicality of leaving home and the clear escapism of the whole undertaking. Chimamanda's novel *Americanah*,<sup>54</sup> on the other hand, boldly proclaims a reversed migration, a return home.

In spite of all this, it remains that this vision of literary borrowing misses the point and is in danger of reducing "influence" to a mechanical, almost one-dimensional, transaction. More seriously, there is a danger of shunting Nigerian literature into a non-literary space of sociology and anthropology, based on a falsely holistic vision of Nigeria as a unified entity, an organic unity, with similar identities and cultural concerns. All this is, in fact, the flip side of the so-called "bolekaja critics,"<sup>55</sup> for whom African or Nigerian literature is so distinct from all other literatures that it is a unique invention without any resemblance to other kinds of literature: in effect literature of absolute difference. This is another name for cultural essentialism. This is also similar to claims for the specificity of African diasporic literature.

Nevertheless, neither Nigerian literature nor African diasporic literature is irreducibly unique in itself. Each in its way, is different—intertextual and historically specific. Sheku Kanneh's warning against the essentializing of African literature has

resonance for the similar essentializing of Nigerian literature that one finds within literary critical circles:

It is vital to resist formulations of a holistic African world, culture, or world view which can be discovered, recovered or re-appropriated. With its plural cultures and influences, Africa has no paradigm and cannot be reduced to a single political aspiration or spiritual unity. This does not mean that African literary works should be denied their specificity, cultural differences, the complex textures of traditions, genres and influences... The most difficult point to accept... might be that Africa is not always thinking of, or speaking to the West, and that, at moments, it escapes.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, African writing cannot be reduced or simplified into a singular compartmentalized unit. It is diverse and complex; it has borrowed from many cultures and traditions; and it contains a significant interplay of the traditional and the modern.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to emphasize that African writers and artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will, and should be encouraged to, claim multiple political and cultural identities, within national and transnational communities. The critical task is to understand how African writers and literati (should or ought to) negotiate the complex changes in the transnational arena, where, by necessity, all intellectuals must operate across cultures. In Africa's case, given the heritage of the colonial past and the developing postcolonial present, we should also focus on the costs and benefits of these transformations. This is the sense in which we should adopt a double perspective, which gives meaning to the insight that although there is a growing community of African writers and artists living in the West, it is not clear how they might, in the long run, influence events, politics, or cultural discussions in their original homeland. Moreover, if this is the case, then it is not clear how the transmigration of African intellectuals could help shape the identity and tenor of the postcolonial African literary experience, which, as we have seen above, has been historically and culturally shaped by the impact of the African colonial experience. In this sense, then, recent migration by the African literati to the West is only the latest version of the pull that the West exerts on African postcolonial identity, which is not likely to slow down in the foreseeable future.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ofir Haiivry, *John Selden and the Western Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> Simon During. "Literature-Nationalism's Other? The Case for Revision," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 140.
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