



Emasculation of the African Immigrant Character in OkeyNdibe's Novel *Foreign Gods Inc.*

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ABSTRACT.

The impact of migration experience on the masculine identity of the immigrant characters in the transnational literature remains a major thematic concern in the migration literature. Through the masculinity lenses, this research study intends to analyze how the migration experience, and cultural discordance between the African cultural dictates on manhood, and the multicultural experiences in the diasporic spaces, impacts on the masculinity of the African immigrant characters in the novel *Foreign Gods Inc.*, by OkeyNdibe. The cultural shock that befalls the immigrant character contrary to his earlier expectations of migration to the West as the enviable vehicle to re-invent his masculine identity, and remain afloat, is the main focus of this study, as we unveil the disillusionment and disembowelment that pervades the immigrant character upon migrating to the diasporic spaces. Through a descriptive research design, the study analyzed the impact of the migration experience on the masculine identity of the African immigrant character and concluded that, contrary to the envisaged masculine re-invention by the African immigrant characters before migrating, the shocking disillusionment that engulfs them upon migrating into the diasporic spaces is palpable. The discrepancy arises from the cultural discordance and disharmony between the western cultures and the African perceptions on masculinity.

Key terms: masculinity, immigrant, emasculation, hegemonic masculinity, othering.

Introduction.

The colonial experience imposed a 'subalternic' self on African image (Gayatri, 1988) hence creating an 'Othering' perception in the African mindset (Saxena & Shama, 2022). The immigrant character's perception of the West in this regard is therefore a glorified caricature of a land of plenty and a vantage point of masculine re-invention to the cherished masculine identity. Migration of the African characters to the diasporic spaces stems from the impact of the colonial process, which created a false image in the African minds, of the superiority of Western countries. Referring to this scenario, Ashcroft talks of the center, in reference to the assumption that the West is the center of civilization, progress and generally what is good contrary to African, the heart of darkness. (Conrad, 1864) Upon migration to the diasporic spaces through a hyped glorification of the shift as a means of acquiring the cherished hegemonic masculine identity, the African migrant character is disemboweled as Gikunda (2022) posits, thus leaving him dismembered and disoriented as a result of cultural shock and disillusionment.

The African cultures have a predefined template on the qualifications of manhood. Riding on the cultural dictates, Connell (2015) in her theory of masculinities, argues that there're three strands of masculinities namely, hegemonic, complacent and subordinate masculinities. However, the esteemed form of masculinity is hegemonic strand, which form the foundation of patriarchy and upon which other forms derive their existence. The African societies being patriarchal in nature, esteems hegemonic masculinity. Upon the African immigrant character's failure to attain the prerequisite hegemonic qualities; especially the towering, and provider masculine traits, they look upon the West as a panacea to their masculine inadequacy.

Several scholars have delved into the studies of African masculinities as to expound on the desperation of the African masculine characters. Mate, (2017) in his research on masculinity argues that, "Patriarchy is an ideology that perpetuates hegemonic masculinity. Quoting Onyango (2008), Mate defines hegemonic masculinity as "the dominant form of masculinity that influences boy's and men's understanding of how they have to act in order to be acceptably male and that this dominant male is associated with heterosexuality, toughness, power, authority, competitiveness and subordination of gay men" (pg 10).

Riding on this prescribed masculine trait, the immigrant character migrates to the multicultural spaces with a prescription of the acceptable masculine traits, a notion which sets him into a path of cultural clash and disillusionment

Upon migrating to the Western countries, the migrant characters are confronted with a myriad of social economic challenges, which they least anticipated, a scenario which Musonye,(2007) describes as social crisis and dilemma of the immigrant character.

The migration force emanating from an asymmetrical relationship which Ashcroft (2004) refers to as superior and inferior other relationship, exacerbates the process of 'Othering' and positions racial and ethnic minorities into an asymmetrical relationship, while posing a threat to their masculine self-efficacy, ultimately leading to what Tosh" (2005) refers to as a "crisis of masculinity.

Faced with the challenge of cultural discordance and disillusionment, the masculine identity of the immigrant character is dented, thus calling for navigation strategies as to survive the migration experience.

The protagonist in the novel *Foreign Gods Inc.* fails to live up to his presumed masculine status, and providing for his family upon acquiring the esteemed American bachelor's degree in economics. Ike fails to get any employment opportunity, not on the basis of his qualifications but his migration status. The option of a green card marriage as an escape route to American citizenship and eventual employment, sinks him to a deeper quagmire of desperation and complications, which sends him down the path of committing a sacrilege felony as to revitalize his masculinity and meet the demands of providing for his mother and other family members. The novel closes with Ike in a mental desperation as the latter option fails to bail out his manhood.

The concerns raised by the others in these texts calls for a deeper analysis of the emasculation that befalls the African immigrant character, and the concept of masculinity from the African perspective.

African immigrant characters' perception of masculinity in *Foreign Gods Inc.*

The novel *Foreign Gods Inc.* captures an array of African immigrant characters' perception of masculinity and its impact on their smooth integration in the diasporic spaces. This stems from their cultural orientation, which demarcates what masculinity and femininity entails.

The protagonist in this text harbor the assumption that, a masculine character must potentially provide for his family. Connell, (1995) points at the provider role as the hallmark of masculinity and patriarchy in general, the aspects that constitute the cherished ideal hegemonic masculinity.

In the novel *Foreign Gods Inc.*, Ike, the protagonist, promises his mother upon the demise of his father, that he will provide for their needs without fail, now that he was in America and almost completing his studies. To his consternation, the acquisition of a cum laude in economics, which he anticipated "would open doors for hire in over 500 companies" (pg. 46) turns into a night mare, eventually forcing him to turn into taxi driving for survival. The taxi driver's job could not enable him meet his basic masculine duty of providing for his family. Expressing the pain of shirking from this duty, the narrator laments that:

"His mother and sister could never know how their barrage of emails tormented him. They accused him of shirking his duty to provide for his widowed mother, yet he had spelled out his acceptance of that responsibility...."(Pg 46)

Ike feels that he has failed in his masculine duty as a man through his inadequacy to provide for his family. His self-guilt, seems to be an open secret hence bemoans the accusations from his sister *Nkiru*. Ther failure to meet the provider role also dents his chances of having a family. Ike's family are concerned of his bachelorhood, despite having reached a marriageable age.

Some days, as if in the grip of malarial urgency, she [his sister] sent two or three [e-mails] at once. Each one belabored the point: mama's demand that he visited home "as soon as possible", "" without further ado," "without any further unnecessary delay," "in due haste" and the come home entreaties often addressed the need for him to take a wife and begin the race to produce an heir. Pg 46

The migrant characters feel trapped in the burden of marriage as a demand for effective portrayal of masculine identity and his survival in the diaspora. However, the demanding state of the migration experience and the challenges faced by the immigrant characters, shifts the definition of marriage as a means of procreation to a license of easy acquisition of American citizenship and access to job opportunities. When Ike first meets Bernita, he correctly dismisses her as "trouble in two legs" pg28. To him she doesn't meet the threshold of a wife material according to the African standards. However out of desperation to acquire American citizenship, Ike chances on Bernita, defying his African perception of marriage and masculinity. Ndibe observes that:

He [Ike] and Bernita were married a couple of months after that first meeting. Two distinct, different dreams had driven them into marriage. Ike was desperate to obtain a green card. It seemed that Bernita wanted to acquire her own in-house sex service. Pg 24.

The objective of this marriage is not to procreate, as African masculine orientation dictates, but as a survival strategy in the diaspora. The perception of the immigrant characters on marriage, as a hallmark of masculinity is thus distorted by their migration experiences, thus forcing them to rethink their earlier perception.

The migrant character in this novel is full of optimism to get a well-paying job upon graduation as starting point of his masculine reinvention. This echoes Lopate's, 2019, observation that, in most of the migration literary texts, the immigrant character often begins in a spirit of wild, open-ended adventure, as their protagonists fling themselves to the Western countries, enthusiastically, with past lives to settle in a big country full of promises, and with a hyped expectancy of living the 'American dream'. This expectancy of Ike to land on a well-paying job in relation to his academic qualifications provides a fertile ground of his emasculation. The failure to access a decent job because of his status weighs on his psychological and social perception. The author observes that:

Wherever he moved, he brought along that stubborn dream for a green card. The card was the open sesame to a corporate job befitting his education. Pg. 27

When Usman applauds America as a land of opportunities as he has witnessed over the years he has lived there, Ike bitterly dismisses him by saying:

“You could be an American methuselah, if you wish. But I also know what I know. With a cum laude in economics, I have been driving taxis for thirteen years. Do you know why? ... it’s all about my accent! So, the talk about opportunities is ridiculous” pg.57

The dismissive tone is a turnaround from the earlier expectancy hence an emasculation of expectations to redeem his masculinity through meaningful employment.

Just like Ngoh (2016) observes, the Ike, the main protagonist in the novel *foreign gods Inc.*, is driven to desperation due to the social constructions on what it is to be a true African man, and the attempt to live up to this demand. Upon several unsuccessful attempts to secure a decent job, Ike plots to commit a sacrilege by stealing *ngene* the god of war and sell it to Mark Gruels the proprietor of the *foreign gods inc.* Pg28. Before then he plunges himself into gambling as he tries his luck to financially redeem his masculine identity. However, all these desperate moves sink him into the abyss of desperation and eventually becomes insane upon the receiving dismal proceeds from the sale of the *ngene*, which could not even meet the cost of bringing it to America. Pg. 330. The desperation is out of the desire to live up to the masculine demand of masculine character being a towering figure. Ike couldn’t accept the reality that Tony Iba was a towering figure in Untoki, yet he wasn’t living in America like him. (Pg. 235-6). With the dream of becoming a towering figure aborted, the migrant character feels socially dethroned.

From his African background, Ike believes that man should exercise power over women and that, it is an abomination for a man to be manipulated by a woman. His uncle Osuakwu had four wives all of whom pledged allegiance and submission to their husband.

“Osuakwu’s wives __ there were four of them, the youngest younger than Ike __ spoiled him. The four women were such excellent cooks that Ike used to marvel at his uncle’s culinary luck. Pg. 186

As the man in Osuakwu’s obi discuss their issues, women busied themselves in the kitchen or in the fields. The man had to stay at the top. Ike’s friend, Big Ed, describes his wife in a jest as “a puppy of a gal”. When Ike marries Bernita, he too hoped to exercise his masculine authority over her. However, it turns out that Bernita doesn’t fall within the precincts a docile and submissive African woman. His attempts to manipulate her are faced with fury and backlash, which finally results to a murky divorce. However, even after the divorce, “a deep fear of queen Bee (Bernita) had kept him from either action” pg.68. His perception of women as subordinate subjects, is suddenly crashed upon marrying Bernita. His status as an immigrant further complicates this state and makes his masculine identity more vulnerable.

Masculinity calls for adult males’ command of respect from children and other younger men. The African patriarchal system protected and maintained this status. When Ike visits Tony Iba, the children in his house, despite having a different opinion from that of Ike, they show no guts to outrightly defy him pg. 245-248. However, in America, Ike is outrightly defied by young children, whom he cautions about making noise and playing near his house. His friend Usman warns him against any open confrontation with these kids:

“My friend, don’t mess with these American kids. You’re looking at the freest kids in the whole world. They can curse you out real bad. And they have the law on their side too..... they could kick your ass, too” pg 55

Ike’s masculine ego is deflated on realizing that he has no power or influence over the kids in the diasporic spaces like he would in the African soil. He falls into masculine resignation, just because of his status as an immigrant.

On first arriving in America as student, Ike felt proud of his nationality and accent. To Ike, his accent was an enviable masculine identity tag while in college, which had endeared him to most of the Western girls like Jill Goldstein.

“There was a time when the word ‘accent’ did not bring Ike pain, only a certain kind of pleasure. in his college days ... he’d scored with several women who confessed to adoring his accent. In fact, his accent was the spark for his relationship with Jill Goldstein...” pg.32-33.

However, during the search for job after completing studies in America, his accent became a source of humiliation and emasculation. When Bernita wanted to deflate his manhood, she pulled out the ‘accent’ card. Additionally, despite his excellent credentials, when he applied for the job in a bank, they dismissed him simply because of his accent. “Your credentials are excellent, but the accent is crappy” pg. 32. To get a corporate job, the man interviewing him in the bank advised him that “he’d to learn how to speak English. Pg. 33. As an immigrant character, Ike’s masculine pride is squashed by the derogatory reference to his accent, thus emasculating him.

In the African societies, it was the onus of the male characters to protect the sacred places and objects. In the novel *foreign gods inc.* Ike, the protagonist, pronounces himself to this duty during his formative stages upon migrating to America. Being the only son in their family, and his uncle Osuakwu having no son, Ike is destined to be the next priest of *ngene* (the *god of war*).

“One day, Ike went to visit his grandmother, Nne. He told her about the strange force that snatched him sometimes during rainstorms and about the indescribable beautiful things he would see during his raptures. “Ngene has favored you, “ Nne said.... Are you saying I’ll be the next priest, like my uncle? “I don’t speak for Ngene,” Nne said. Pg 17

Despite the sacred role he attributed to the deity, the challenges he faces upon graduating from Amherst college in America forces him to think of how he can cash on it to bail himself from the economic challenges that had bedeviled him and threatening his masculine duty of providing for his mother as he had promised. The thought of selling *Ngene* stems from a discussion he had with a collegemate back in school.

It was Fella who, back in college, first sowed in him the idea of looting his people's ancient god, a war deity at a time bereft of wars. There were a lot of wars it could fight for us here, Fella had told him. Think of all the shit it could do for black folks in the states. How it could sneak into the white house or wall street. Cause mayhem and shit. Help overthrow this whole unjust system." Pg.20

Caged by a myriad of masculine demands, which he could meet due to his financial incapability, "his mind seesawed, leaned this way, then that. The torturous exercise (of stealing and selling *Ngene*) racked his nerves and left him fatigued and mentally exhausted. Yet, he ultimately decided." Pg 64. His masculine status challenged, Ike opts to defy the masculine duty of protecting the sacred objects and places as dictated by his culture, and falls to the trap of destroying what he should have protected, hence emasculation sets in as a result of his immigrant status.

Conclusion

The study concludes that, the African immigrant characters' migration to the west as a means to reinvent their masculine identity in the novel *Foreign Gods Inc*, is a dream in futility and a mirage, which, plunges him into the deep abyss of disillusionment. The protagonist in this novel is driven by a prototype masculine identity that he aspires to radiate, in accordance to his African cultural orientation, which esteems hegemonic masculinity and frowns at other alternative forms. As a result of this preconditioning, the African immigrant character wades in a quagmire of social and cultural dissonance, which in essence disorients his smooth integration with the western cultures, thus becoming a victim of emasculation.

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