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Afropolitan Mobility and the Ethics of Global Belonging in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examined the figuration of Afropolitan mobility as an ethical problem in four works of recent Nigerian and Nigerian-inflected fiction, namely Lesley Nneka Arimah's story collection *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017), Ayobami Adebayo's novel *Stay with Me* (2017), Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's memoir-essay *Notes on Grief* (2021). Drawing on Achille Mbembe, Simon Gikandi, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant, the paper argued that these texts collectively enact a post-Afropolitan reckoning with the costs of global mobility, attending to the structural immobilities that cosmopolitan celebration tends to elide. Their ethical arguments are shown to be inseparable from their formal innovations, and the paper proposed a postcolonial cosmopolitics of accountability adequate to the contradictions they illuminate.

Keywords: Afropolitan mobility, Ethics, Belonging, Nigerian fiction, Postcolonial cosmopolitanism

Introduction

The question of what it means to belong to the world has never been a neutral or abstractly philosophical one for African writers and intellectuals. It has always been posed under specific historical conditions, namely, that of colonial subjection, racial hierarchy, forced dispersal, and, more recently, the radically unequal distribution of mobility that characterises the neoliberal global order. When the concept of the Afropolitan emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century, it appeared to offer a fresh and affirmative answer to this question, that is, a vision of African global subjectivity that was neither burdened by the victimhood narratives of Afropessimism nor constrained by the territorial imperatives of nationalist thought. The Afropolitan, as Taiye Selasi imagined her in "Bye-Bye, Babar" (2005), was at home everywhere and nowhere, fluent in the cultural codes of multiple continents, and possessed of a freedom of movement that seemed, at last, to place the African subject on equal footing with the cosmopolitan citizens of the global North. It was a compelling vision, and it generated considerable excitement in both literary and critical circles. It was also, as subsequent scholarship has demonstrated with increasing rigour, a vision that concealed as much as it revealed.

This paper argues that the most ethically serious Nigerian fiction of the

past decade has moved beyond celebratory cosmopolitanism toward a searching interrogation of what global mobility costs and what obligations it generates. The four primary texts, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Notes on Grief* (2021), Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017), Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019), and Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017), do not constitute a school or a movement in any programmatic sense. They are formally diverse, generically distinct, and preoccupied with different aspects of Nigerian and African experience. What they share, and what justifies their reading in conjunction, is a persistent concern with the underside of the Afropolitan promise and underscores the grief that mobility leaves behind, the gendered and classed structures that make mobility available to some and deny it to others, the colonial histories that continue to shape the terms on which African subjects can aspire to global belonging, and the structural inequalities that the celebration of cosmopolitan freedom tends to aestheticise rather than confront. The paper draws on the critical frameworks of Achille Mbembe, Simon Gikandi, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Caroline Levine, and Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh to illuminate these concerns, and it proposes, by way of conclusion, the outlines of what it calls a postcolonial cosmopolitics of accountability as a framework adequate to the ethical complexity these texts illuminate.

Literature Review

When Taiye Selasi published "Bye-Bye, Babar" in *The LIP Magazine* in 2005, she introduced into literary-critical discourse a concept whose fortunes have since been decidedly uneven. The "Afropolitan," describing Africans of the diaspora who navigate smoothly between continents, maintain multiple cultural affiliations, and inhabit global modernity with apparent ease, was initially received as a liberatory corrective to both Afropessimist stereotyping and the nativist demands of certain strands of postcolonial thought. Within a decade, however, the concept had attracted substantial scepticism. What had seemed like an expansion of possibility came to appear, under closer examination, as the ideological self-portrait of a narrow class fraction – the beneficiaries of elite education, metropolitan cultural capital, and the visa regimes that, in a world of sharply unequal mobility, distinguish the privileged migrant from the asylum seeker and the undocumented worker. It is in this critical aftermath, what one might call the post-Afropolitan moment, that the four primary texts examined in this paper take their bearings, and it is their shared capacity to subject the Afropolitan promise to sustained ethical interrogation that makes them, when read in conjunction, among the most searching contributions to contemporary world literary culture.

The theoretical coordinates of this interrogation are provided most forcefully by Achille Mbembe. In *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Mbembe extends his concept of necropolitics into a comprehensive account of the global distribution of life-chances under racial

capitalism, arguing that the African subject's encounter with global modernity is not an encounter between equals seeking mutual recognition but a renegotiation of the terms of a structural subordination that colonialism inaugurated and that the neoliberal global economy has perpetuated in new and more insidious forms. The Afropolitan's claim to cosmopolitan belonging must be read against this background. It is a claim advanced within a system that has historically assigned African bodies to disposability, and its success, where achieved, is always partial, conditional, and shadowed by the racial logic it appears to transcend. Simon Gikandi sharpens this critique by identifying in Afropolitan discourse what he calls "nostalgia without memory." It is an affective attachment to Africa sustained by and through the very distance that migration makes possible, one that functions to depoliticise the economic structures producing both the aspiration to leave and the impossibility of easy return for most Africans (Gikandi 12). Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruelly optimistic" attachment, developed in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), provides the affective theory that these structural accounts require. For Berlant, subjects in the contemporary neoliberal world characteristically attach themselves to fantasies of the good life, including prosperity, upward mobility, and stable belonging, that are structurally unavailable to them, and the attachment itself is cruel insofar as it binds the subject to the very conditions that obstruct her flourishing. The aspiration to global belonging celebrated in Afropolitan discourse is, in Berlant's terms, precisely such a cruel optimism, which is a structurally conditioned attachment to a form of freedom that the system of global inequality simultaneously promises and withholds. What distinguishes the post-Afropolitan texts examined here from earlier iterations of this aspiration is their capacity to name this cruelty, to render visible in literary form the structural conditions that transform the dream of mobility into a compound of aspiration and suffering.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in postcolonial literary criticism and narrative ethics. The primary method is close reading, that is, an ethically and historically situated practice attentive to the ways formal choices, such as narrative voice, genre, and focalization, enact the ethical arguments that texts advance. The four texts were selected for their contemporaneity, their engagement with the ethics of global mobility, and the diversity of their formal approaches. No empirical data were collected; the study's claims are grounded in close engagement with the literary and critical archive.

Findings

Across the four primary texts, a consistent pattern emerges, namely, the aspiration to global mobility is persistently shadowed by grief, gendered constraint, colonial historical inheritance, and the structural exploitation of those who remain immobile. Each text stages this shadowing through distinct formal means, and the analysis that follows

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traces the specific ways their formal organisations enact the ethical arguments constitutive of the post-Afropolitan literary moment.

Discussion

Grief, Distance, and the Ethics of Transnational Loss: Adichie's *Notes on Grief*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Notes on Grief* (2021), written in the immediate aftermath of her father's death in June 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic that prevented her return to Nigeria, is formally anomalous within her oeuvre precisely because of its vulnerability. It is not a novel but an extended personal essay, a mode that strips away the mediations of fiction to confront, with unusual directness, the contradiction at the heart of the Afropolitan condition. Adichie is, by any measure, among the most successful embodiments of the Afropolitan ideal – globally celebrated, institutionally recognised, and possessed of the cultural capital that makes smooth transnational navigation possible. And yet it is precisely this mobility, the life organised around international travel and metropolitan literary circuits, that renders her unable to be at her father's deathbed. The pandemic merely makes explicit what the structure of the Afropolitan life always already contains as a latent possibility that the pursuit of global belonging will exact a local cost that cannot be recovered.

Throughout *Notes on Grief*, Adichie reflects on the inadequacy of the English in which she is compelled to mourn, noting that certain Igbo concepts central to her father's sense of a life well-lived have no adequate English equivalents, and that to mourn him in English is already to perform a translation that diminishes the object of mourning. This linguistic predicament is not merely personal; it is a symptom of the structural condition of the postcolonial African writer whose medium of global communication is the colonial language and whose most intimate emotional life remains anchored in the vernacular.

The text's most ethically searching passages concern the relationship between Adichie's global success and her father's postcolonial aspirations. James Nwoye Adichie was a statistics professor and university administrator whose intellectual formation was shaped by the nationalist aspiration to build, through education and professional achievement, a modern Nigeria capable of taking its place as an equal in the community of nations. His daughter's global celebrity is the fulfilment of a trajectory he helped to inaugurate; yet it is also, paradoxically, the condition of her distance from him at the moment of his death. *Notes on Grief* implies that the Afropolitan's success is both the realisation and the quiet betrayal of the postcolonial project that produced her. Sara Ahmed's account in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) makes *Notes on Grief* a structural critique of the affective economy the Afropolitan life requires.

Domestic Immobility and Gendered Belonging: Adebayo's *Stay with Me*

Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017) operates at a considerable remove from the cosmopolitan settings of Afropolitan fiction, its world confined

almost entirely to Nigeria across the decades of military rule and structural adjustment. Yet the novel is, in a profound sense, a work about the ethics of mobility and belonging, because it excavates the domestic and patriarchal structures that the Afropolitan aspiration historically fled, making visible the gendered immobility that conditions the mobile subject's freedom. To read *Stay with Me* alongside post-Afropolitan discourse is to encounter the historical conditions out of which that discourse emerged. Noteworthily, the structural adjustment of African economies in the 1980s and 1990s was among the most powerful forces driving the emigration of educated Nigerians to the global North, and it is precisely the world that Adebayo describes, one of constrained resources, patriarchal authority, and deeply gendered immobility, that those emigrants were, in part, attempting to escape.

The novel's narrative is organised around the marriage of Yejide and Akin and the crisis produced by Yejide's apparent infertility. Adebayo's handling of this crisis is distinguished by its refusal to assign guilt or innocence in any simple way, such that both protagonists are simultaneously victims and perpetrators, constrained by social structures that neither has chosen and neither can simply refuse. What the novel insists upon, however, is the asymmetry of those constraints. The social costs of infertility fall almost exclusively on Yejide, who is subjected to public humiliation, communal pressure, and the threat of polygamy, while Akin, whose own infertility is the suppressed cause of the couple's childlessness, is largely insulated from social censure by the patriarchal structures that render male reproductive failure unspeakable. Adebayo renders Yejide's predicament as a condition in which the desire to love and to be loved adequately is perpetually frustrated by structures that assign to women the obligation of transparency while reserving for men the prerogative of silence, so that Yejide's longing and her suffering are functions not of personal failure but of a systematically organised injustice.

The dual first-person narration enacts the asymmetry it describes. Accordingly, Yejide's chapters are saturated with social exposure and managed hope, while Akin's suppress the knowledge that would relieve her suffering. Caroline Levine's argument in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015) that formal structures are themselves political organisations of experience is directly pertinent here. Thus, Adebayo's decision to give Akin's perspective equal narrative space to Yejide's is not a gesture of liberal evenhandedness but a formal strategy that makes visible the epistemic asymmetry the novel describes, requiring the reader to inhabit the position of one who knows what is being withheld while reading the account of one who does not. The novel's formal arrangement thus enacts in its structure the very argument it advances in its content, making the asymmetry of gendered knowledge not merely a theme but a lived readerly experience.

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Colonial Labour, Aspirational Masculinity, and Tragic Mobility: Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*

Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) narrates the disastrous migration to Cyprus of Chinonso Solomon Olisa, a poultry farmer, recounted by his *chi*, his Igbo guardian spirit, who pleads his case before the council of the supreme deity Chukwu. This conceit situates the individual story of contemporary labour migration within the longue durée of Igbo spiritual and historical experience, producing a work that is simultaneously a realist account of the costs of aspirational mobility and a mythological meditation on the colonial archive that underlies it. Chinonso is not an Afropolitan in any of the usual senses as he has no metropolitan cultural capital, no educational credentials, and no prior experience of international movement. His aspiration to migrate to Cyprus is produced by romantic attachment and by the class hierarchies of educational capital that colonial modernity produced and that postcolonial Nigeria has perpetuated. The migration is, from the outset, a product of social coercion rather than of the free cosmopolitan choice that Afropolitan discourse tends to celebrate.

The *chi's* narration constitutes a formally and ethically radical choice whose implications extend well beyond the cosmological. By insisting that Chinonso's story be evaluated within the moral framework of Igbo thought rather than within the secular, individualist frameworks of Western liberal modernity, Obioma refuses the terms on which cosmopolitan success and failure are typically assessed. The *chi* situates Chinonso's choices within a web of ancestral obligation and colonial inheritance that individual aspiration excludes. In Cyprus he enacts Mbembe's trajectory from aspiration to disposability in human form. The *chi's* narration insists that this trajectory be understood not as a consequence of individual moral failure but as the outcome of a historical structure that colonial modernity built and that the contemporary global economy maintains. Cajetan Iheka's argument in *African Ecomedia* (2021) on network forms illuminates how Obioma's *chi* narration embeds the individual story in cosmological and colonial connections the secular realist novel cannot accommodate.

Speculative Immobility and the Political Economy of Emotional Labour: Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*

Lesley Nneka Arimah's debut collection *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017) deploys speculative fiction, magic realism, and fable as instruments of ethical analysis. The title story depicts a near-future world in which a mathematical technique neutralises grief for those in the global North while Africa remains excluded. The protagonist Nneoma, a grief-processor for wealthy European clients, discovers on returning to Nigeria that her skills are useless before collective, historically sedimented suffering. Her mobility depends on a service whose value is generated by the very inequalities producing the suffering she processes, namely, the Afropolitan's success, the story implies,

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is structurally entangled with the immobility of those who remain.

The collection's earlier stories pursue the same problematic in more domestic registers. "Who Will Greet You at Home" tells the story of a world where women make babies from materials that match their social status. The fable is deliberately transparent in its symbolism, showing a society that measures women's worth through their ability to reproduce and where the quality of that reproduction depends on class position. In this way, Arimah holds up a mirror to the actual conditions of postcolonial African social life. By rendering these conditions through fable, Arimah denaturalises what realism tends to naturalise, exposing the constructedness of the structures that immobilise women within domestic economies while the Afropolitan narrative celebrates the mobility of a select few. The story "Light" addresses the chronic absence of electrical power that structures daily existence across much of Nigeria and the aspirations to modernity and global connectivity that are simultaneously produced and frustrated by infrastructural scarcity. Arimah is clear-eyed about the cost of the improvisation that this scarcity demands and about the structural conditions, specifically the neoliberal state's abandonment of its obligation to provide public goods, that make it necessary. The ethical force of the collection as a whole lies in its refusal to aestheticise deprivation. Where the Afropolitan narrative converts African experience into the raw material of cosmopolitan self-fashioning, Arimah insists on the irreducible weight of the material and structural conditions she describes.

Towards a Postcolonial Cosmopolitics of Accountability

The four texts converge on a postcolonial cosmopolitics of accountability. Adichie's *Notes on Grief* makes the case from within the experience of loss, using individual mourning to expose the affective economy of Afropolitan mobility and the human costs of the life it requires. Adebayo's *Stay with Me* attends to those immobilised by patriarchal structures. Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* embeds the aspiration to migrate within the spiritual and colonial history that the cosmopolitan framework excludes. And Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* extrapolates present structures of emotional and material inequality to their logical conclusions.

What these texts demand is what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (2018), describe as decolonial cosmopolitics – a vision of global belonging that takes seriously both the aspiration to cross-cultural solidarity and the historically specific conditions of power and dispossession within which that aspiration must be pursued. The ethics of global belonging, as these novels and stories understand it, is not a matter of being open to the world but of being accountable within it. It is accountable to the histories that have produced the present unequal distribution of mobility and to the human beings whose lives are shaped and constrained by that distribution. This accountability is not a comfortable

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position, and none of the four texts offers its reader the consolation of synthetic resolution. What they offer instead is something more valuable and more honest, that is, the formal complexity and affective density necessary to sustain ethical contradiction rather than dissolve it, and the literary imagination to make that contradiction, in all its human weight, genuinely felt. The formal innovations through which these texts pursue their ethical arguments, Adichie's essay mode, Adebayo's epistemic dual narration, Obioma's cosmological narrator, and Arimah's generic plurality, are, as Levine's account of form makes clear, not merely aesthetic choices but ethical ones. They are, indeed, organisations of experience that enact in their structure the very arguments they advance in their content. To read these texts with the seriousness they deserve is to recognise that the post-Afropolitan moment in Nigerian fiction has produced, quietly and without fanfare, some of the most ethically searching literature in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

The question of what it means to belong globally when belonging is so unevenly distributed does not admit of a comfortable answer. These four texts offer not a solution but an insistence on the full ethical weight of the problem. Adichie's *Notes on Grief* teaches that the Afropolitan life is also an exposure to loss and irreversible distance. Adebayo's *Stay with Me* insists that the domestic world the Afropolitan escapes is a site of structural injustice. Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* embeds that mobility in colonial histories cosmopolitan discourse cannot perceive. And Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* uses speculative fiction and fable to expose the political economy of emotional labour underlying the surface freedoms of the Afropolitan world.

Together, these texts constitute a significant intervention in the ongoing debate about African cosmopolitanism, global belonging, and the ethics of mobility. They do so not by offering programmatic answers but by performing, in their formal organisation and their affective texture, the kind of ethical attention that the post-Afropolitan moment demands, that is, an attention that refuses the consolations of cosmopolitan celebration without retreating into the equally inadequate consolations of nativist critique, and that insists, above all, on accountability. The ethics of global belonging, as these writers understand it, is not a matter of being open to the world but of being answerable within it, as well as answerable to the histories that have produced the present unequal distribution of mobility, and to the human beings whose lives are shaped and diminished by that distribution. This is the ethical demand that the best contemporary Nigerian fiction places on its readers. It is a demand worth taking with the utmost seriousness.

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