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Memory and Exilic Resolve in Armah Darko's *Beyond the Horizon and* Michael Afenfia's *Bury My Bones in Saskatoon*

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Abstract

From the later part of the twentieth century to the twenty-first, there has been an exodus of skilled and unskilled labor from the Global South to the much more industrialized and affluent Global North. This has prompted the flourish of exile literature. scholarship on Amma Darko's diasporic writing is limited to the diasporic experience to the exclusion of self-exile that is eloquent, particularly in her *Beyond the Horizon*. With a focus on the duality between memory and displacement, this essay, examines in Darko's text along with Michael Afenfia's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon* how memory functions in exiles life. Both texts reveal diasporic characters, haunted by distasteful memories of their respective home lands in Ghana and Nigeria resolve to be exiles in Germany and Canada, their host nations. Essentially, in both texts, memory functions in two different ways: for Mara, the major diasporic voice in Darko's novel, memory of the homeland provokes shame, guilt, self-condemnation, and self-exile; for Owoicho, the major diasporic character, the memory of the gruesome murder of his beloved wife, and children by armed bandits in his country, and the fear of sustained insecurity propel him into self-exile.

Human existence from the Biblical to the present times is replete with movements in droves – from the dispersal at the Tower of Babel as recorded in the Holy Bible, to the Jewish dislocation after the destruction of the first temple to Babylon. From Bronislava Volková's account (12), the Jews seem to be the most displaced people in the world, suffering displacement from 587 BCE, the 7th century during the rise of Islam, and up to 1948 in the twentieth century. The twenty-first century with its global economic and humanitarian crises has precipitated not just the migration of the Jews, but also greater global migration, with a preponderance of skilled and unskilled youths. The great advancement in technology and ICT springing from the Global North with its consequential economic prosperity is responsible for the greater fluidity in human existence from the close of the twentieth century

until now. Expectedly, much of the migration gravitates from the less developed countries in Africa and South Asian countries that constitute the Global South to the affluent Global Northern countries of Europe, America, and Asia.

For Africa, the focus of this paper, transnational mobility in stupendous droves recorded in history was the slavery era that lasted between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The period saw the forceful dislocation of millions of Black Africans from their continent to Europe, America, and the Caribbean Islands. The later part of the twentieth century to the twenty-first has witnessed yet another humongous exodus of Black Africans from the continent to countries in the global north. In Sam Robert's revelation on a February 2005 *New York Times*, "Since 1990, according to immigration figures, more [Africans] have arrived voluntarily than the total who disembarked in chains before the United States outlawed international slave trafficking in 1807" (Okpewho 7). Unlike the first, which was a forceful displacement, the present is mostly a voluntary desire for better economic and educational opportunities or political asylum.

What provokes the movements of the people, mostly of the erstwhile colonized countries, in hordes to the industrialized countries are the consequences of Western colonization. This is validated by the position of many anti-West scholars who continued to hold the West culpable for the sustained economically-and-industrially-crippled state of the erstwhile colonies. Ngugi and others in the same boat of thought believe that neo-liberalist economic policies prescribed for the erstwhile colonized countries are designed to sustain the economic and political control of the countries of the global south. The implementation of these policies has stimulated seemingly endless poverty and political crises that instigate the global-northward pull. Isidore Okpewho would not agree less with Ngugi in the introduction of his co-edited book, *The New African Diaspora*, when he says:

> Once the colonizers got firmly entrenched in their respective African territories, they lost no time setting into place the social and other structures that would secure them the freedom they needed for pursuing the principal goal of their adventure, which was the exploitation of the natural resources

> of the colonies in the interest of their nations' industrialization programs. On the one hand, they destroyed, or at least set aside, the indigenous systems of leadership and control in favor of a political structure that put the ultimate power in the hands of an imperial metropolis far away from the colony. On the other hand, they exploited the ethnic and religious rivalries between segments of the nations they had created, so that while these rival groups fought among themselves, their natural wealth was being steadily drained from their lands (6).

The expropriated wealth of the colonized no doubt is ploughed into the economies of the developed countries, leaving the former in sustained mendicancy with a seemingly compelling alternative of fleeing the economic and political anomies at home. While for some of the migrants, migration is just an opportunity to inhale healthier economic breath outside and return to their turmoiled homeland economically healthier; for some, the thought of return is blurred by the poignant memory of the homeland, consequently, they are compelled into self-exile in their host countries. The two concepts, diaspora and exile, which are associated with displacement, are distinct. In the words of María Jesús Llarena-Ascanio,

> The latter is more closely associated with a coherent subject and a limited conception of place and home. Diaspora, on the other hand, is more of a hybrid space where the maintenance of dominant conceptions of location and identity is problematized. Indeed, it is in this space of in-betweenness that the diasporic subject reconstructs itself, problematizing the issues of home, belonging, and nation (5).

The negotiation of identity within this "space of in-betweenness" has continued to provoke imaginative narratives by both self-exiled or diasporic migrants with foci on race, identity, trauma, memory, and human trafficking. Within the foci of migrant writings, memory is significant to race and identity. Mariann David and Javier Munoz-Basols in the introduction to their edited book, *Defining and Re-Defining Diaspora: From Theory to Reality*, interpret memory as constituting the core of the diasporic life. They explain that in the life of the diaspora, there is a memory of a paradise lost, a

romanticization of the homeland. This enables the diasporas to negotiate their identities even in a supposed environment deterritorialized by globalization and multiculturalism.

Halbwachs, identified by Tanja Bosch (3) as one of pioneer theoreticians in the study of memory, identifies three types of memory: autobiographical memory—an individual's memory of events experienced personally; historical memory—these are recorded memories of events handed over to individuals, and collective memory—the active past that forms our identity) Collective memory seems to be the forte of Sturken as further quoted by Bosch (3). He seems to share the same view as Halbwachs with regard to memory and identity formation, as he construes memories as constituting a fundamental part in the negotiation of culture.

Memory studies with Halbwachs as one of its pioneering scholars started in the social sciences, but has since caught the fancy of scholarship in such areas as education, history, literature, and philosophy. Neumann (qtd in Urania Milevski and Lena Wetenkamp) sees the relevance of memory to literature existing in the former's "resort to culturally predominant ideas of memory and, through their literary techniques, represent these ideas in an aesthetically condensed form (199). In exile studies, we find the relationship between memory and cultural identity negotiation in literary narratives. This is particularly significant for the exile or migrant writings that are the fallouts of the nostalgia for the "paradise lost"—an nostalgia provoked by the feeling of alienation from the homeland and racialized discrimination in the host countries. The nostalgia for the homeland sometimes provokes the identity affirmation and eventual return migration, as illustrated in the major character, Ifemelu in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and other characters in other diasporic texts.

The memory of the homeland does not always instigate a nostalgia and a desire to return, especially when the events that propel the migration are melancholic. A recall of the past is nothing but pain, as the homeland consequently is not "a paradise lost." For such émigré the host country becomes a permanent home, as he or she exiles himself from the homeland. With regard to the self-exiled, memory of the homeland functions in two ways: the fear of acceptance into the homeland in the case of an eventual return-migration or the memory of the sustained existence of the insipid

experiences back in the homeland that compelled their migration. The distinctions in the exilic experience seem yet to be sufficiently explored in the African diasporic literary scholarship, particularly in the available essays on Armah Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, one of the two texts selected for this paper—the second being Michael Afenfia's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon*. This paper, therefore, examines in the selected texts how the memory of the homeland functions in two different ways to actuate self-exile in the African emigres.

While, given its novelty, Afenfia's text is yet to generate critical literary attentions, Darko's text in contrast has triggered scholarship. Much of the available scholarship on Darko's referent texts dwells on such quotidian issues as trauma propped by the distasteful experiences in the host country, trafficking, prostitution, or genderized exploitation. One of such essays is Oseghale Francis and Mary Emohiomeu Ohiwerei's 'Reflection of Social Ills in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*.' The duo, in their interpretation of the text, indict patriarchal African values in the cruel sexual and psychological exploitations suffered by Mara, the major character and narrative voice in the novel. The essayists argue that Akobi's, the husband of Mara abuse of Mara is enabled by the African cultural values that debase the woman to a subservient position. The above-mentioned essay sparingly examines Mara's sojourn abroad as a prostitute, heaping the buck on African leadership failure. The essay is a departure from the focus of this paper.

Laure Clémence Cakpo-Chichi Zanou, Célestin Gbaguidi and Koumagnon Alfred Djossou in 'Amma Darko's Contribution in *Beyond the Horizon* to Contemporary Gender Portrayals' are not different in the primary focus, as the feminism ideology serves as the lens with which they examine the text. The scholars see Darko highlighting the male gender as evil and responsible for the devaluation of the woman. They see Darko portraying the male characters in the texts as 'liars, mentally as unstable,' materialistic, pimps, tricky, cynical, sadistic, violent, villains' (112). To the trio, therefore, Darko in her text attempts to counter earlier male creative texts that privilege the male gender and minimize the female gender, deconstructing the image of the man.

Examining Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* alongside two other of her texts, Koumagnon Alfred Djssou in the essay, 'The Monster in Patriarchy: A

review in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon, The Housemaid,* and *Faceless*.' Examining *Beyond the Horizon* alongside two other texts by Darko, Djossou does not depart from the feminism thrust. He indicts the African cultural and traditional norms for promoting the silence of the woman, and this encourages the male domination and devaluation of the woman. This essay, like other scholars,' departs from the self-exile of the Mara the major narrative voice even when her perpetual self-alienation from her homeland eloquently prefaces and epilogizes the narrative.

Veneered in these issues examined by scholars in Darko's text is that of self-exile of the major character and first-person narrator, Mara. Her resolve to exile herself from Ghana, her birthplace, is prompted by her memory of the homeland. Mara is a young lady baited from her country into prostitution in Germany by her heartlessly abusive and money-minded husband, Akobi. Before her migration abroad, Mara as a young lady, had been raised in a rural Ghanian village, which consequently infused into her the African cultural values that included love and respect for the marriage institution as well as aversion to such practices as prostitution. Her rural upbringing is symbolic in the interpretation of the text, particularly from the chosen angle of interpretation of the text—memory of the homeland and self-exile.

The infusion of African rural cultural values is figurative of the cultural distinctiveness that influences her life, as evidenced in her submissiveness to her husband back in Ghana and her earlier reactions to her forced-prostitution abroad. Mara finds prostitution debasing from her first introduction into the profession. Her repugnance, no doubt, is rooted in her African cultural background that debases and deplores prostitution. The traditional Ghanian society abhorrence to the profession haunts and provokes melancholy in her, propelling her to finally resolve never to return home. From the first page of the text, through the first-person narrative voice, the reader is introduced to her melancholic portrait while in her professional room.

The name Mara biblically means bitterness, and the author of the text seems to have made allusion to this to aptly depict the sad experience of her diasporic character. Mara's sadness over her forced prostitution is captured in the narrative through the skillful knitting together of the beginning and

end of the narrative, highlighting her unhappiness and the consequential self-exile because of memory of the homeland. At the opening page, Mara expresses her disconsolateness thus, 'Truth is, I just like ovals, I find them serene, and they dispense more sympathy to me than other shapes. And God knows I need more of it" (1). The statement is revealing of a greatly emotionally brutalized person in desperate need of sympathy that she scoops even from mere shapes. Consequently, from the beginning we see a diasporic prostitute who is hurled into a state of psychological disequilibrium and isolation as she reveals further:

> I am virtually naked, but that is not why I feel so cold because of this coldness.
> I feel it does not grip my body so much as it does the soul. It is deep inside me that feels this chillness, from the dejected soul my body harbours, a soul grown old from too much use of its shelter. Yes! I've used myself, and I have allowed myself to be too used to care (1).

The virtual nakedness and the attendant coldness in the soul of the narrator as she reveals, are symbolic of her being denuded of the acceptable cultural standards of Africa, which clothe her with dignity. The prostitution of the body into which she is hurled, therefore, is an aberrant indulgence that robs her of the covering of dignity. The feeling of nakedness and coldness in her soul consequently triggers a torrent of tears and further introspection that culminate in her decision never to return to the homeland:

> Tears are building up in my eyes. They always do when I stare at what is left of me. They are blurring my vision and are slowly rolling down my face in agonizing rhythm like the beating of the devil's drum…dropping down one after the other, painfully slow, painfully gradual, onto these two flabby drooping things I call my breasts, my tired graceless bosom. I fear what I see when I look at myself. I shiver at the sight of my sore, cracked lips... I have plastered my ebony black face, and it looks horrid too. I know, but I wear it, because it is the trade mark of my profession. What my poor mother back home in black Africa says to these hideous traces of bites and

> scratches all over the back of the neck, should she ever have the misfortune of seeing them. I fear to imagine (2).

Mara's self-examination, particularly of her material being, here is done through the prism of the memory of her African culture, represented by her mother. The detest of prostitution by her African culture is symbolized by her mother's great displeasure that she reminisces. Consequently, she dreads ever returning home and will rather be exiled; her staying back is forced on her by the apprehension of acceptance resulting from her memory of the cultural values that derogate prostitutes. Her feeling of unacceptance is in tandem with Bronislava Volková's interpretation of the experience of the exiled, to whom he reveals that the exile feels secluded from 'the prevalent moral and social values of their society of origin' (13).

In Mara's case, the fear of social stigmatization evokes haunting shame and sadness, which only prop up her resolution on self-exile, as she reveals:

> I have decided not to think of going home. I just don't belong there any longer. Moreover, I have this fear that haunts me day in and day out—that if I show my face there, out of the blue, that sex video that Akobi made of me clandestinely will show up there, too. Worse still, I am now to be seen on a couple more sex videos. Home will have to remain a distant place (139).

Mara's reason for self-exile is representative of some exiled diasporics of African descent. What keeps them permanently away from their homeland is not essentially because they have happily integrated into the host countries; it is the fear of being denigrated by the standard of the cultural values of their homeland from which they are severed. This experience is slightly different from other exiles, and Afenfia's text, which is the second text, highlights memory of the homeland as responsible for the exile's decision.

Memory and Exilic Resolve in Afenfia's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon*

Mike Afenfia is a yet-to-be globally resonant Nigerian-Canadian writer, nonetheless, his writing exudes so much imaginative deftness, particularly in his novel, *Bury My Bones in Saskatoon*. Through this novel, he makes a significant contribution to the oeuvre of migrant and exile literature. With Nigeria's Middle Belt as its symbolic setting, the text explores a major nightmare that has haunted the Nigerian nation for over a decade—insecurity of lives. The Middle-Belt and some parts of the northern part of the country have been the hotbed of banditry and terrorism, and farmers and herders clash, provoking a humanitarian crisis with its corollaries of displacement and loss of lives. The frequency of the activities has devalued human life as the print and social media are daily awash with gory pictures of children, adults, and the elderly victims of banditry or terrorism.

Insecurity of life, besides the economic challenges arising from corruption, have continued to toss the nationals out of the shores of the country, with some of such emigrants having a clean break with their motherland and choosing to remain exiled in foreign lands. Such experience, expectedly, have provided the spool with which Afenfia have spun his narrative with an exilic resolve of the main character in the novel, Owoicho Adalole. This decision is succinctly captured by the title of the text, *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon.*

In the text, Owoicho, a popular Nigerian broadcast journalist based in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. Despite the menace of insecurity in the country, at the earlier part of narrative, he seems to be enjoying his broadcasting job. His fate is however suddenly altered when his equally a university-educated wife becomes inflamed with the passion of leaving the country for Canada. The migration of his wife, Ene's bosom friend to Canada with her family, fuels her desire to exit the country as well with her family. It is worthy of note that Ene holds a privileged position in the civil administration of her state. The Owoichos desire to relocate despite their middle-class comfort underscores the insecurity in the country as shooing even the employed and employable skilled labor out of the country. In the text, Ene's friend's departure from the country awakens her to the reality of the prevalent devaluation of human life

by the murderous activities of armed terrorists or bandits in the country. She convinces Owoicho, her husband, to relocate with his family abroad.

At the peak of their preparation, however, the unimaginable happens as Ene and her two children, along with her driver, have their lives abridged by armed bandits when they are returning to Abuja from a pre-migration visit to her parents at Makurdi, the capital of Benue. Expectedly, Owoicho is devastated by the mindless slaughtering of his wife and children. The gory videos of their murder haunt him and his only surviving first daughter, Ochanya who escapes it because she has chosen to stay back in Abuja during the said visit. The tragic event for Owoicho makes insecurity a palpable evil in the land, even as it becomes the most significant experience in Owoicho's life. It is therefore not surprising that it serves to him as an undercurrent to exit his beloved motherland and stimulator in his strong determination never to return to his homeland when he eventually gets a visa to leave for Canada.

That insecurity and not economic or academic reason is therefore central to his migration and eventual decision never to return to his motherland. At the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Abuja, Nigeria, where he and his daughter are set to depart his homeland, the memory of the insecurity becomes active, provoking fears in him as

> He knew that from when they taxied down the runway of the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Abuja, there was no turning back. What terrified him the most was not knowing if this was the last time in Nigeria and if he'd ever see his homeland again. And even if he were to return, would his country be the same way he left it? Would the people he was leaving behind be safe? Was there a promise of a better future for them, and would the government change its ways and put an end to corruption, bad governance, and all the other terrible things that had held back the most populous country in Africa for so long? (133)

His fears that find expression in the several questions are fundamental to his life and decision abroad because it is improbable that there will be a reversal of the experiences that compel the nationals to leave their homeland. For Owoicho, his relocation is validated by the 'news of insecurity in Nigeria and the failing economy, which he commented on constantly during the TV

programs he anchored, which was sufficient proof that he was on the right path' (133).

His experience from his first night in Saskatoon, his host city, seems to confirm to him that Canada is different, as he sleeps and wakes up without fear of being visited by thieves. Canada, unlike Nigeria, where his sleep is punctuated by the sound of electricity generators, offers complete peace and security. He notices that his landlord, the Browns who are fellow Nigerians, sleep with the door unlatched with iron, in contrast to the Nigerian experience. This provides succor to his heart traumatized by the coldblooded murder of his beloved wife and children. It is not surprising, therefore, that he decides to remain exiled in Saskatoon.

His stay in his earlier months is, however, not without the quotidian experience of migrants from developing nations. His initial attempts to get jobs are fraught with challenges, as he is readily offered debasing jobs requiring raw physical strength, which contrasts his university degree with his prestigious job as a broadcast journalist back in Nigeria. As a result, he gets frustrated over his inability to cope with these jobs while his wallet bleeds from several bills that he has to pay. At the peak of his frustration, however, he gets a job offer from his state's governor back in Nigeria as Benue Media Aid. The job in Nigerian parlance is a juicy one for the crooks as it offers opportunities to enrich oneself through fraudulent means. Owoicho is set to return to Nigeria as he calls his parents-in-law, for whom he has picked a thing or things before he gets a job offer as a broadcast journalist—a job that he sees as befitting his status as a university graduate.

Consequently, with the job offer comes a complete turn-around in his decision to return. His sudden change of plan, no doubt, is born out of the fear of returning to find nothing unchanged, especially with the economy, corruption, and insecurity of life. He may have mentally juxtaposed the security in Canada and the insecurity back in Nigeria. Being alone with his teenage daughter, Ochanya, seems to keep the memory of the brutal death of his wife afresh. Returning to Nigeria would have exacerbated the memory of his wife. It is worthy of recall that his desire to flee his motherland is further intensified by the memory of the coldblooded slaughter of his wife and the impotence of the government to end the impunity of the bandits. Canada may be an alien land, but it offers him solace necessitating his self-exile. His

resolve to be an exile seems to have been done without feeling pain, as he is seen at the end of the narrative excitedly performing his new job as a broadcast journalist, interviewing 'the second female Prime Minister of Canada' (208). His excitement over his permanent stay away from the homeland underlines that the fact that what Nigeria loses without regret, is a gain to the outside world.

Conclusion

Both texts are threaded together by self-exile provoked by the memories of the homeland by the major characters. Memory, as illustrated in the experiences of the two major characters in the two distinct texts, engenders two distinct impacts that generate their common decision to stay exiled in their respective countries of Germany and Canada. For Mara in Darko's text, memory of the homeland evokes shame, seclusion, and sadness that catalyze her resolution for self-exile. In contrast, in Owoicho in Afenfia's text, memory of the homeland stirs up apprehension of the sustained-existence of the murderous activities that compel him to exit his homeland. The two characters are hauled out of their individual countries not by personal choices: for Mara, she is deceived out of the city life, to which she has begun to adapt to Germany by her cruel husband; while Owoicho is constrained by the unbridled murderous activities prevalent in his country. Significantly, albeit memory of the homeland instigates the exile of the two diasporic characters, being in exile for Mara is living with the feeling of perpetual guilt, shame, and isolation from the homeland and being an outsider in the foreign land. In contrast, for, Owoicho, being in exile is being severed from the butchering back home and being at home in the foreign land. The two texts by two West African writers of Ghana and Nigeria essentially reveal two contrastive exilic experiences: one with guilt, pain, sadness, and shame, and the other with excitement over the perpetual self-alienation.

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