Cultural Multiplicity and African Migrants' Dilemma in Sola Owonibi's *The Black Men Of Bissonnet Street*

Taiwo A. Stanley Osanyemi
Department of English Studies
Adekunle Ajasin University
Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.
taistanley@yahoo.com/taiaustin2020@gmail.com;
taiwo.osanyemi@aaua.edu,ng

Abstract

Cultural multiplicity is a growing concept in migration studies globally, it has some salient merits on the lives of the migrants, but its challenges are often worrisome as portrayed in Sola Owonibi's *The Black Men of Bissonnet Street.* Previous critical engagements on cultural multiplicity have often focused on cultural hybridity and cultural loss with little or no attention paid to cultural multiplicity and its attendant dilemmatic effects on the life of African migrants and their families. This paper, therefore, attempts to investigate and examine the complex interplay between African migrants, cultural multiplicity and its consequences in the migrants' marital and familial matters. The data for the study is the primary text which is Sola Owonibi's *The Black Men of Bissonnet Street.* It will be subjected to critical textual analysis. Inspirations will be drawn from Homi Bhabha's model of Migration and Hybridity Theory as the theoretical framework. This theory will undergird the analysis. It is discovered that cultural multiplicity has some advantages in the lives of the migrants. It is discovered that the challenges of cultural multiplicity are dilemmatic to the migrants. The paper concludes that cultural multiplicity has disintegrated the peace and harmony in the migrants' marital affairs and families and as such, Africans should have a rethink before migrating to foreign countries to seek greener pastures.

Keywords: African migrants, cultural multiplicity, familial disintegration, cultural loss, cultural dilemma.

Introduction

Cultural multiplicity is an egregious product of cultural contacts. It stems from migration which is typically the movement of people from one place to another, often in search of better socio-economic opportunities and living conditions. Migration can be internal when it involves the movement of people within their country's borders, such as from rural areas to urban areas, it can be international when it involves movement across national borders. To Africans, contemporarily, migration implies a current or modern upsurge in the movement of people from Africa to Europe and other developed nations of the world. Cultural multiplicity refers to the coexistence of multiple cultures, identities and worldviews within individuals who have transitioned beyond their national borders (Appiah, 2018)

Arowolo (2019) argues that when Africans migrate, they are thrust into a new cultural environment that challenges their existing cultural beliefs, practices and identities. As they sojourn in this culturally unfamiliar terrain, they are prone to experience cultural multiplicity. One glaring reason for this is the cultural exchange that occurs when they encounter new customs, traditions and values. They may find themselves drawn to certain aspects of the host culture such as music, food or festivals, which they incorporate into their own lives. Similarly, they may also cling to certain aspects of their original culture, such as language, religion or family traditions. This blending of cultures and traditions metamorphoses to the creation of cultural multiplicity.

Considering the economic dryness and scarcity of job opportunities in African continent contemporarily, migration appears to be a quintessential expedition and strategy to combat poverty and joblessness. The imperativeness of economic survival provides the need for African migrants to imbibe social adaptation as a coping measure in their host communities (Olutayo 2019). According to Olutayo, this portends that the African migrants must form new social networks and relationships in order to thrive in their new environment. This may involve joining community groups, attending cultural events or participating in local customs. As they engage and interact in their host communities, adoption of new social norms, values and practices that will complement their existing ones becomes expedient. Such adoption may manifest in learning to communicate in a new language, eating new foods or participating in local festivals. The aftermath of this social adaptation is the multiplication of their identity and culture as they combine salient elements from local and foreign cultures.

In tandem with social adaptation, migrants may experience cultural multiplicity due to economic necessity in order to survive. It may become necessary to combine economic practices and entrepreneurial skills from both cultures. They may start a business that caters for their new community using skills and knowledge from their country of origin, while also adapting to the host country's economic systems and regulations (Diallo 2019). This will lead to cultural multiplicity and identity that will succinctly reflect the migrants' resourcefulness and adaptability.

Marriage and family discordance has been the major challenge of cultural multiplicity and it has been the major focus in migration studies (Bonizzoni 2018 & Farahani 2018). They postulate that migration projects a vast and growing focus on mixed and non-mixed citizenship families. According to them, migrants must reconcile their personal and familial norms with the social and familial realities of the host communities. They must negotiate their cultural identity to permeate a coping milieu for sojourning. This blending of cultural identities can be both empowering and challenging as migrants navigate gropingly between their old and new selves (Bonjour & de Hart 2021). Moreover, migrants may experience a sense of cultural dissonance; they may struggle to maintain their original cultural traditions and values while also adopting new ones. Ndiaye (2020) posits that where the migrants struggle to grasp the right way to adapt to the host country new values, responsibilities, behavioral patterns and expectation, this can lead to cultural conflicts between generations, as younger family members may embrace the host culture more readily than the older ones.

Furthermore, cultural multiplicity can be adduced to refer to the coexistence and intersection of multiple cultures, identities and values within a single society or community. According to Teye (2020), cultural multiplicity is a concept that recognizes that individuals and groups can have multiple cultural affiliations, and that these affiliations can be complex, nuanced and context-dependent. He sees cultural multiplicity as a beneficiary edifice that is capable of exposing migrants to diverse cultural practices with the propensity of cultural enrichments to individuals and groups. He further posits that cultural multiplicity can enhance creativity and innovations as it fosters multiple cultural sources to create new ideas and expressions on individuals and groups. Arowolo (2017) might have inspired Teye by seeing cultural multiplicity as an agent of a huge socializing concept. He argues further that it promotes social cohesion. Arowolo recognizes and values cultural multiplicity as a possessor and promoter of social cohesion as individuals and groups feel included, belonged and respected. Nonetheless, cultural multiplicity can be seen as a complex concept that acknowledges the diversity and richness of human cultural experiences that are inimical and injurious to individuals especially, migrants

who find it conflicting and capable of heightening predicaments and psychological imbalance. This shall be the thrust of this paper.

Statement of the Problem

Previous scholarly and literary engagements on African migrants and migration have paid close attention to cultural hybridity, cultural loss and nostalgic feelings of returning to the 'roots', a significant gap remains while exploring the far-reaching consequences of migration on the personal, marital and familial lives of African migrants that are orchestrated by cultural multiplicity and its attendant dilemmas. This paper, therefore, attempts to investigate and examine the complex interplay between African migrants, cultural multiplicity and its consequences in their marital and familial matters. By exploring the complexities of cultural multiplicity, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding and insight to the challenges of migration in Africa.

Research Method

The research instrument shall be the library, both the conventional and the internet. The data is the primary text which is purposively selected. It is Sola Owonibi's *The Black Men of Bissonnet Street.* The text will be subjected to critical textual analysis in both content and form. The analysis will be influenced by Homi Bhabha's model of Migration and Hybridity Theory. The essence of this theoretical framework is to identify the complexity of cultural multiplicity, identity and dilemma in the text, to distinguish between illusion and reality and to undergird the analysis of the finding.

Analysis

Before textual engagement, it is pertinent to keep the readers abreast with the brief synopsis of the text. Owonibi's *The Black Men of Bissonnet Street* is a thrilling and pathetic narration of five African men who desperately migrate to America with lofty hope and aspiration for a better living condition. In spite of their desperation, the social and cultural realities in America hamper the realization of their dreams. They are confronted with an intense racial, cultural and economic challenges and predicaments that later compel them to myriads of misery, cultural dilemma, illusion and frustration. Their stories become pathetic because their quest for greener pasture is dashed as hardship, cultural division, divorce, familial disintegration, psychological unrest, nostalgia and others become their daily companions because of their inability to survive multiple cultural pressures. They struggle amidst their inherent African cultures and the upsurge of the compelling American cultures. At the end,

these men lose their initial dream of economic success, marriages, familial harmony, and peace of mind.

Dovetailing from the synopsis, it is glaring that the real prompter for the migration exhibited by the five male characters in the text is the socio-economic dissatisfaction at the time of movement with their home countries. This is enmeshed in the quest for greener pastures. The challenges that confront these African migrants are concisely and explicitly summed up as the effects of cultural multiplicity on the protracted yearnings and aspirations of the young African migrants. The choice of these fictitious migrants is very apt because they come from the four cardinals of African continent. This again, speaks volume about the socio-economic stasis in Africa. The compelling effects and challenges of cultural multiplicity and the attendant dilemma will be analyzed in the characters of Kwaku (a migrant from Ghana, West Africa), Prince Malandela (a migrant from South Africa), Jerry (a migrant from Kenya, East Africa), Deji (a migrant from Nigeria, West Africa) and Hamza (a migrant from Morocco, North Africa).

Kwaku Boateng leaves his country, Ghana with a zealous quest for a better living condition in order to acquire control and authority over his nagging wife, Aku and earn a profound love and respect from his wife and children. He has identified poverty and economic imbroglio in his home country as the major source of his wife's nagging and unruly behavior. As a Ghanaian migrant, he seeks to uphold the traditional values and roles he is accustomed to in his homeland. In America, however, these traditional norms are challenged by his wife, Aku who is now fully engrossed and conformed to the cultural realities and behavioral patterns of Americans, and this affects the psyche of Kwaku and he becomes worried about the future of his family, especially his children. He expresses one of his cultural confusions in the excerpt below from the text:

> Yes! I do! That is her bio-mum. We have a restraining order against her. I am her foster mum! Oh my God! The cops swept into action as everyone began talking at once. The words "parental abduction" buzzed around. It was a new one to Kwaku. Parental abduction. Foster mum. He found the notion that America was a place where he or Aku could be accused of abducting their children one day. What a country! He and the other immigrants talked about it and swapped stories about various oddities they had witnessed (17).

Being drenched in cultural confusion and a pressing need to alleviate poverty in his family, Kwaku begins a persistent search for a balance between his African authoritative roles as husband and father and the egalitarian dynamics

of his new society. Kwaku's image as an African is evident in his attempts to maintain his cultural practices while adapting to the new social order. His struggle to gain respect within his family and community illustrates the broader challenge of maintaining one's cultural identity in a foreign land. Kwaku's life reflects the broader cultural multiplicity experience of seeking to assert one's identity and culture amid conflicting cultural expectations.

When Aku, his wife eventually imbibes gregariously the American customs and cultures that appear alien to Africans, Kwaku becomes skeptical and illusionary concerning his decision to leave Ghana for America. He cannot control his wife's excessive love for materialism; he cannot control and admonish his children who are already tilted towards their mother's ways of life. He sees himself as a failed African husband and father, he feels nostalgic but the unpleasant economic situations at home keep him halfheartedly enduring in America. He consistently marvels at his wife's sudden uncontrollable desire for materialism and crave for American cultures. Aku does not see herself as a Ghanaian migrant anymore, she falsely accuses her husband of an attempt to rape and subsequently Kwaku is evicted from his home by American court. This seems delusional to Kwaku and he laments psychologically:

> Now the policemen hovered, infusing the air with tension. He could feel the excitement exuded by the children, almost as if they would break into a dance once he stepped out. He was a broken man. With tears in his eyes, he looked at his children. His tears were not for what he was currently losing. They were for what he had long lost. He was grieving the beautiful family he once had. He was grieving the termination of the dreams he had (41).

Kwaku's inability to succumb totally to the whims and caprices of cultural multiplicity as a migrant like his wife, brings cultural dilemma and total loss of identity and family. "Kwaku never returned to the house" (50).

Prince Malandela is beclouded with the pleasant narratives about America. His motive of leaving South Africa is to seek for economic and marital satisfaction, he never has the premonition of encountering unbearable challenges that will thwart his dreams.as an immigrant, and he is driven by the dream of achieving financial security and upward mobility. His mimicry of American entrepreneurial attitudes and practices is an attempt to fit into the economic fabric of his new environment. However, this pursuit leads to a sense of inadequacy and frustration when all his efforts do not yield the expected results. Shortly after his arrival in America, he feels very complacent and fulfilled with his new love and marriage with Shirley, an American lady. He is so proud of her and her arrangement to get him the green card. The excerpt below explains Prince Malandela's ecstasy and complacence:

> She was brimming with excitement which she carried over into their marriage. There was nothing much to do other than get Prince's green card sorted. She filed the application for him. Shirley went about things with manic energy. She commenced the name-change process. Even before the process was done, she already signed her name as Mrs. Malandela. He doubted there was a prouder Mrs. Malandela in the whole world (63).

The amazement and excitement above are camouflage and ephemeral. Shirley, who is well conversant with her country cultures and laws that protect married women blindly, suddenly turns the South African's Prince to her punching bag with physical assaults and domestic violence. She is very materialistic which is another hallmark feature of American married women in the text. She finds it difficult to join her financial resources with her husband's paltry income to build a loving and peaceful home which is the lofty desire of Prince Malandela.. Within a short time, Prince Malandela's marriage, hope and dreams begin to crack and he narrates his ordeal or perhaps dilemma thus:

> But he did not know what to do with this Shirley – the one who slapped him when angry and threw things at him. How could he live with this? … One such morning, she woke up and exuded darkness. It was hard to describe to whomever who had not witnessed it. She did not have to talk before he knew that she was on the warpath. She did not even have to move. He could sense it. He was the prey and she, the merciless predator that enjoyed the torturous existence of the prey (70).

From the above scenario, his quest for success is not only about financial stability but also about achieving a sense of belonging and marital stability in his adopted country. This pursuit however is becoming hampered by cultural dictates that are alien to his South African humble background. In the midst of his psychological trauma, his wife's notion of American culture of a divorce brings a total collapse of his dreams and yearnings. So, it becomes traumatic and dilemmatic for him to realize his age-long dream. Succinctly, cultural multiplicity that confronts him in America, cultural dissonance between him and Shirley and Shirley's obsession for materialism become the instruments of the shattering of his dream and the disintegration of his family. A closer look at the excerpt below will provide credence to Malandela's dilemma orchestrated by cultural multiplicity:

> The word "divorce" and her unveiled threat hit him with a thud. That was the moment he realized that whatever they had together was dead. When she came in, he stayed out of her way. He made sure he had showered and brushed his hair before she arrived because he did not want her to see the

> fullness of his pain. He knew his pain made no difference to her. So, I have commenced the divorce process. "I have taken down the YouTube channel and I have blocked you on social media." It looked like she enjoyed driving in the nail into his coffin. "Please, don't try to contact me. I would hate to hurt you, as I have said. Don't put me in a position to have to choose between saving you and hurting myself. I will not hesitate to choose myself and I will hate you for it (76).

Another victim of cultural multiplicity as the harbinger of family or marital disintegration and killer of dreams and aspirations in the text is Jerry, a migrant from Kenya in America. He is in love with Annie, an American lady for the sake of economic stability, for he needs to get the green card. It is revealed to him that Annie, his lover has a bad past, she has a criminal record and she is facing a trial in the court but he makes a promise to stand by her in order to demonstrate his love for her. He has the option to quit the relationship but he needs economic stability that being married to an American lady will facilitate. He narrates:

> All the information overwhelmed Jerry but he resolved to stand by her. It was her past. He had not gotten married to that Annie. He was sure it was a minor hurdle in their relationship. He even caught himself being fleetingly satisfied that the trial would give him a chance to demonstrate the depth of his love for Annie. He considered it a challenge and he would gladly take on any challenge to prove the depth of his love for her. She was worth the fight (94).

They eventually get married but the glee of marital life and the proximity to the realization of his dream are short-lived as domestic violence and the threat of deportation from Annie truncate the marriage. Annie, as an American lady like Shirley leans on American culture and law that provide an extreme protection for married women. She engages in domestic violence to push her husband out of the marriage. Jerry has leaned on the marriage for his economic survival and irritating behavior of Shirley has become the bulwark bone to the achievement of his dream in America as an African migrant. He expresses his sad experience with his wife's domestic violence:

> He turned to walk away and as his hands closed on the handle of the bedroom door, something smashed into the wall beside him, narrowly missing him. The wall was splattered with spirits. He went into the bedroom and closed the door, slightly shaken. For the first time since they got married, the thought crept up on him that their infertility was probably a good idea… the more Annie grew violent the better she became at throwing things. The

> flower vase left a seat in the shape of a little mouse on his temple. Once, he stepped on the shards of bottle she had thrown at him. He had to go to the ER. If he stayed out later to avoid her ire, he met an enraged woman that seemed to be out to kill him. She threatened him with deportation. "The ICE will get you. I will make sure they get you. They will get you and return you to that nightmare of a country you came from." (96-97).

Jerry becomes a victim of multiple cultures because he has a dream of economic stability through migration, but the dreams have become a mirage and there is a need for him to survive. To him, pitifully, migration is longer the best option to survive.

Deji, a Nigerian immigrant in America is also affected by the negative side of cultural multiplicity like other black men in the novel. He marries a Nigerian and they migrate to America seeking for greener pastures and better living condition. In America, the wife embraces American cultures extremely. She lusts for materialism such that she engages in marital infidelity. The husband is reticent about her marital waywardness because he wants his family to be united and harmonious, especially for the sake of his two daughters, he does not want to rear his two girls in discordant atmosphere. On one fateful day, he catches his wife red-handed in bed with his younger brother and decisively abandons his home and his cherished daughters. The wife threatens him with a divorce because she knows the material benefit that awaits her with American legal system. Deji leaves his home to become a lonely man and he takes solace in hanging out and drinking. From his usual hang out, he encounters Shani, an African-American lady; he decides to marry her for socio-economic reason. Thus, Deji represents a victim of cultural multiplicity for the sake of survival amidst foreign cultures that are inimical to his home culture and his inner mind. Having lost his first wife and two daughters on the altar of extreme American cultures and norms that favor women at the expense of men, he becomes a man without a voice.

Shortly after his marriage to Annie, he discovers that Shani is cheating on him just like his first wife. This connotes that married women in America are agents of betrayal and materialism and when it is revealed that Shani's marital unfaithfulness is anchored on her love for materialism, Deji becomes dejected and he craves for the lost peace, he once had in Nigeria. Subsequently, Shani leaves the marriage with a sternly promise to deal with Deji according to the dictates of American marital cultures and norms. He becomes demoralized as he becomes the sufferer of cultural multiplicity in his marriages. He narrates his unpalatable experience with other black of Bissonnet Street:

> He was outraged. Soon, Shani got her way. He found that home was the last place he wanted to be. Every evening, he found his feet pointed towards Bissonnet. He was outraged. He paid half of the rent, bought all the food, paid the bills, even though she earned more than he did. When Boateng asked what was wrong with him, he burst out ,"I pay all the fucking bills! And the lawyer smiled, a smile that seemed to say, "Welcome to America." (121).

Thus, Deji has fallen into two predicaments in his bid for greener pastures in foreign country.

Hamza, a migrant from Morocco suffers from the adverse effects of the mixture of multiple cultures in America. His attempts to adopt American cultural norms and values are met with disappointment as he is confident of surviving cultural challenges through the color of his skin. He feels that it is only black Africans that have cultural challenges, little knowing that American cultures and societal ladies are out there to milk dry all migrants that come to America with the aim of getting the green card for economic stability. He is confronted with the legal and social constraints in America, and he discovers that he cannot escape from the social claws and entanglement of the obnoxious multiple cultures display by American societal ladies. As a victim of cultural multiplicity, he becomes homesick and yearns for returning home. However, he becomes assertive of economic stability as he marries Winnie, an American lady with two children from her previous marriages. With the marriage, he believes he will have economic success as it will facilitate acquisition of the green card and this will bring economic succor. He sees marriage as natural, loving and unconditional but unfortunately, Winnie sees marriage as business transaction, this individual's dichotomous view makes his marriage to collapse untimely. Like other American female characters in the text, Winnie is extremely materialistic and she leans on American cultures that support women's penchant for materialism and divorce. This makes her to display unruly behaviors with Hamza, her husband. She employs domestic violence to achieve her notion that marriage is a transactional business. Her behaviors become unbearable to Hamza and he narrates his sad experience below:

> Every day, she collected every money he made and still insisted he did the shopping. If he tried to hold any money back, she slapped him. Her strength surprised him. One time she slammed him against the kitchen wall and her strength stunned and scared him. When he was not able to buy all the grocery, she would hold him by the neck and push him out the door. One time, she pushed him out into a winter storm, she developed a taste for expensive things…. "Why are you so useless, Hamza?" She decided he had

to make himself more useful. I mean, you cannot just wake up, eat and go back to sleep. The plate will not clean itself, the floors will not mop themselves. You might as well make yourself useful (147-148).

When American cultures and ways of life become burdensome to him, his wife begins to threaten him with deportation and he is unwillingly entangled to an affair that is full of thorns and sorrows. Hamza's efforts to conform with obnoxious American marital norms often clash with his traditional values leading to frustration and dilemma.

Conclusion

The dreams, hopes and aspirations of the five black men who are African migrants in America have been showcased. It is pathetic that their dreams could not see the light of the day because of their inability to blend their traditional cultures and norms with the alien cultures and values in their host countries. This is cultural multiplicity. Their sojourn and bid for survival highlight the continuous process of cultural negotiation and identity formation which a migrant needs to succeed and survive in foreign communities. As African migrants migrate to Europe and America, the intensity of cultural multiplicity increases as it is seen in the case of the five African migrants in this study.

Though, the home countries of the African migrants may be chaotic economically but the best place to enjoy cultural peace and freedom is home. Africans should have a rethink about issues of migration which are increasing at an alarming rate now in Africa. Africans should team up with their political leaders and make their continent livable. The gains of migration cannot be compared with the challenges that manifest in the form of cultural conflicts, dilemmas, and identity complexities.

References

Appiah, K.A. *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*. Liveright Publishing, 2018.

Arowolo, O. "The impact of migration on family structure and functioning among African migrants", *Journal of Family Issues* Vol.38 (14). 2017, pp.3511-3534

Arowolo, O. *African Migration and Family Disintegration: A Critical Analysis*. Lexington Books, 2019.

Bonizzoni, Paola. "Looking for the best and brightest? Deservingness regimes in Italian migration policies" *Journal of International Migration and Integration*. Vol.18(4) 2018, pp. 1031-1046.

Bonjour and de Hart. "Intimate citizenship: Introduction to the special issues on citizenship" *Journal of Identities*. Vol. 28(1). 2021, pp.204-220.

Diallo, A.M. *The Human Cost of Migration: How Family Separation Affects African Migrants*. Open Democracy, 2019.

Farahani, Farah. *Production and Skill Utilization among Migrants*. Noirledge, 2018.

Ndiaye, J.N. *The African Migration Crisis: How Europe's Border Policies Are Tearing Families Apart.* The Conversation, 2020.

Olutayo, A.O. "The effects of migration in family relationship among African migrants in Europe" *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. Vol. 50 (2), 2019. pp. 147-164.

Owonibi, Sola. *The Black Men of Bissonnet Street*. Noirledge, 2023.

Teye, R.K. *Transnational Migration and Family Dynamics: A Study of African Migrants in the UK*. Routledge, 2020