



Between Home and Exile: Displacement and the Diasporic Experience in Chinelo Okparanta's Happiness, Like Water

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By

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Abstract

*This paper explores the themes of displacement and the diasporic experience in Chinelo Okparanta's short story collection *Happiness, Like Water*. It examines how the tension between "home" and "exile" shapes the identities and emotional landscapes of her characters. The study analyses how Okparanta foregrounds the complexities of transnational existence, particularly for Nigerian women negotiating cultural, sexual, and psychological borders. Through close readings of selected stories such as "America" and "Fairness," the paper interrogates how migration is both a site of liberation and alienation, often revealing the limits of belonging in both homeland and hostland. The narratives reflect a layered experience of displacement that goes beyond physical relocation to encompass emotional estrangement, cultural dissonance, and identity fragmentation. The paper concludes that Okparanta's short stories explode the myth and illusions that are harboured by Nigerians whose escapist tendencies deceive them that all they require for a life of comfort and ease is the green card that admits them into America.*

Keywords: Diasporic experience, homeland, migration, identity, belonging

Introduction

In contemporary African literature, the diasporic experience has emerged as a critical site for interrogating identity, belonging, and the persistent legacies of colonialism and globalisation. Chinelo Okparanta's *Happiness, Like Water* (2013), a collection of short stories centered on Nigerian women, offers a compelling lens through which to examine the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement. The stories oscillate between Nigeria and the United States, weaving narratives that explore how characters navigate the precarious terrain between home and exile. For Okparanta's protagonists, migration is not merely a physical journey but an existential condition marked by loss, longing, and a constant negotiation of cultural identity.

Displacement in *Happiness, Like Water* operates on multiple levels: geographical, emotional, cultural, and sexual. Characters who seek new beginnings abroad often confront the harsh realities of alienation, racism, and the struggle to preserve or redefine their identities in unfamiliar contexts. Simultaneously, those who remain in Nigeria are not immune to feelings of dislocation, particularly in relation to restrictive gender norms and socio-political instability. In both spaces, the ideal of "home" is complicated, elusive, and often symbolic of unattainable wholeness.



This paper argues that Okparanta's stories articulate a nuanced vision of diasporic subjectivity, one that reveals the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in the search for belonging. By situating her characters at the intersection of personal desire and cultural expectation, Okparanta dismantles binary oppositions between home and exile, tradition and modernity, rootedness and movement. Okparanta also deconstructs the myth that America is the promised land of the earth and that it holds the Golden Fleece that all immigrants are in search of. Her characters face a different reality on getting to the American shores as the illusions of instant wealth and prosperity evaporate before their eyes. Contrary to the expectations of instant success, Okparanta interrogates the issues of colour bars and racism that beset immigrants abroad in their quest for a better life.

Colourism and the Phenomenon of Self-loathing

Chinelo Okparanta, like most diasporic writers is seemingly caught in the throes of a hybrid experience which underlies the realities she explores in her collection of short stories. Okparanta like the title of her volume suggests, harps on the mirage; that is "America" and her conception by intending Nigerian migrants as *the promised land of the earth* flowing with milk and honey. She x-rays the American utopia which exists in the imagination of Nigerian migrants as the Eldorado and the contrasting dystopia of an actual existence in the touted land of limitless opportunity.

"Fairness", one of the stories in the collection explores the phenomenon of skin-colour and complexion which are at the heart of the politics of race and racial dialectics in America. Imperial hegemony and the attendant social polarities of race and the complexes stemming from skin colour have remained a post-colonial phenomenon that has continued to plague human societies and expand the cleavages that repel racial parity. America remains the bastion of racial tensions in spite of biological and even scientific proof that all men are created equal. Dismissing the human-orchestrated polarities of race and the political barriers to racial parity in an article entitled "Race and Biology" L.C Dunn writes:

The judgement of biology in this case is clear and unequivocal. The modern view of race, founded upon the known facts and theories of heredity, leaves the old views of fixed and absolute biological differences among the races of man, and the hierarchy of superior and inferior races founded upon the old view, without scientific justification. (31)

Regardless of the lack of both scientific and biological justification for race and skin colour conferring inherent superiority, socio-political machinations make it such a knotty social problem especially in America. Chinelo Okparanta explores this malaise within the context of post-colonial discourse. In "Fairness" the protagonist, Uzoamaka who is dark-skinned is obsessed with being fair-skinned like the fair and flawless models she sees in American fashion magazines. It is not only Uzoamaka that is obsessed with her skin complexion, but even her mother also loathes her dark skin and keeps buying American fashion magazines and ever wishes that she could be as fair-skinned as the models in those magazines are.

As intending migrants, Uzoamaka and her mother believe that being as fair as the white models confers one with a natural advantage hence their stark obsession. They could give anything in exchange for fairness and they could do anything to alter their present complexion as it were. This negative mode of self-perception makes Uzoamaka to become envious of their housemaid



Ekaite who is a fair-skinned girl who has come to live with them from Akwa-Ibom State. Uzoamaka sees herself as not being good enough because of her dark-skin and looks at the other fair-complexioned girls as having a natural advantage over her even though they are only housemaids and of a lower social standing. As a result, she is ready to apply all kinds of bleaching recipes to alter her complexion:

We stand on the concrete steps, chewing groundnuts and meat pies, all of us with the same dark skin, matching, like the uniforms we wear. All of us, Onyechi of course, because her skin has now turned colour, and we are eager to know how. It is the reason she stands with us, though she no longer belongs. She is now one of the others, one of the girls with fair skin. (35)

The above inner complexes as betrayed by Uzoamaka smack of the superior/inferior schema as it relates to Blacks and Whites which has remained a permanent polarizing feature in race relations in America and much of the Caucasian West. Uzoamaka does not cover her desperation to have a skin colour that approximates the “white ideal”: ‘our skin is the colour not of ripe pawpaw peels, but of its seeds. We are thirsty for fairness’(35).

Uzoamaka’s negative perception of herself is conveyed by Okparanta in the starkest of metaphors. In expressing her preference for whiteness or a fair skin as against the dark one which she possesses, she talks about even mosquitoes preferring a fair skin:

‘ No, they bite Ekaite more. Even the mosquitoes prefer a fair skin’. The words come out in a mutter. Her tone is something between anger and dejection. I imagine the flesh of a ripe pawpaw. It is not quite the shade of Ekaite’s skin, but it, too, is fair. (36)

Uzoamaka’s obsession with fairness bears enormous psychological effect on her perception of life and a general positive self-image and carriage. This image of the inferiority of her skin colour is a product of white supremacist ideology which deems the black skin as inherently inferior to the white:

And I wonder if Ekaite ever takes time to look at her reflection in the door. And if she does, does she see herself in that superior way which I imagine all fair people see themselves? (38)

The pervasive belief in the inherent superiority of America as the centre of civilisation and modernity makes Uzoamaka’s mother to become enamoured with American magazines which suit her oriented perception of the ideal world and people:

The first magazine arrived two weeks later, cosmopolitan, pale faces and pink slips decorating the cover, women with the colour of fresh corn. Perfect arches above their eyes. Next was *Glamour*, then *Elle*. And every evening following that, Mama would sit on the parlour sofa for hours, flipping through the pages of the magazines...(39)

The phenomenon of Nigeria’s collapsed and dysfunctional educational system and the craze for foreign education among Nigerians also features in this short story. Here, in the face of the inferior perception of all things Nigerian, coupled with the irretrievably broken state of our educational system, Uzoamaka’s parents view America as the sole destination for a good



education where she could also take advantage of the limitless opportunities which the land of opportunity offers:

She needs a good education...It is not a new idea, this one of a good education, but she has that serious look on her face, as if she is weighing it with the thoughtfulness that accompanies new ideas. "That is what America will give you". She says. "A solid education. No strikes. Imagine, with a degree from America, you can land a job with a big company here, or maybe even remain in America. Land of opportunities". She smiles at me. Her smile is wide. (40)

Her mother's thoughts as captured above are a sad commentary on Nigeria and its derelict and broken educational system which owing to deplorable neglect suffers from strike after strike with standards on a rapid downward spiral. The view of America as the land of ease and limitless opportunities, like most Nigerians is also harboured by Uzoamaka's mother. She tells her daughter that she would receive in America with high job prospects in a multinational corporation and how she reserves the prerogative to either come back to a waiting job in Nigeria or remain in the lush comforts of America.

"Fairness" documents the dialectics of skin colour and the psychological dimensions and realities within a postcolonial praxis. The protagonist of the story plunges deep in her desperation to alter her skin colour to fit with the identity matrix of socially constructed realities of colour perception. The emotional crisis of identity which plagues Uzoamaka, an intending migrant, and her mother on account of their skin complexion, pushes them to resort to artificial alteration of colour pigmentation through chemical formulas and bleaching creams:

And we'd go to the *Everyday Emporium*, and there'd be stacks of them at the entrance, neat pyramids of creams. Mama did not at first grow light with them. She was cautious. She would grow light if she had the best quality creams, not just the brands they sold at the *Everyday Emporium*. She wanted first-rate, the kinds she knew America would have. (42)

The psychological turmoil which results in such complexes and grave artificiality to fit into the socially constructed standards of the ideal also comes with some deleterious physical harm. The skin suffers some subtle damage which may snowball into grievous self-harm:

With Motivate, patches formed over my skin, dark and light patches, like shadows on a wall... We tried Esoterica next. A six-month regimen. Three times a day. No progress at all. Skin success was no success. (43)

The desperate but futile skin change solutions used to curb the psychological trauma of self-loathing because of result of a negative self-perception only prove to be a fruitless vanity capable of bodily damage:

Days later, when the scabs start to form, I imagine peeling them off like the shells of a velvet tamarind...I think how close she has come to having a skin like Onyechi's and I feel something like envy in me, because what she has wound up with is fairness after all. Fairness, if only for a while. (46)

"Fairness" tells the story of emotional displacement and complexes arising from social constructions of the normative ideal. Uzoamaka and her mother go through emotional trauma housed in black skin and are desperate in their quest to alter their dark complexions to a fair



one. Colour-lines and racial identity are global phenomena that have created polarities and racial categorisations such as the Caucasian race, the Mongoloid race and the Negroid race. These imperial dichotomies and binary order and the attendant social prejudices underscore the central motif in this story.

Same-sex Attraction, Stereotypes and the Illusions of America

Another story in Okparanta's collection in the realm of the diaspora is titled "America". The story fits into the framework of the prevalent narrative that America is a land of opportunity and boundless freedom where emigrants are footloose and fancy-free and can do whatever they please without let or hindrance. It tells the story of two young women caught in a same-sex relationship in a society (Nigeria) that frowns at such attraction. Nnenna Etoniru and Gloria Oke develop a mutual affection that grows into a same-sex romantic affair. Gloria Oke has relocated to America where she has taken a job with a state university and Nnenna Etoniru still works as a science teacher at Government Girls' College Abuloma in Port-Harcourt. Nnenna now plans to relocate and be united with Gloria Oke where both would nurse and nurture their newfound love together. At first, Nnenna's parents frown deeply at her strange love affair and would rather that she gets into a legitimate relationship that would give them grandchildren. Her mother is particularly worried about her same-sex romance.

Mama stands where she is for just a moment longer; all the while she is staring at me with such a somber look in her eyes. 'So, this is why you won't take a husband?' A woman and a woman cannot bear children. That's not how it works'. (90)

But Nnenna quite unlike her parents seems to relish her bizarre love affair and rather worries at the cynicism of people especially in Nigeria where same-sex relationships are outlawed:

Mama still reminds me every once in a while, that there are penalties in Nigeria for that sort of love of a thing. And of course she is right. I've read of them in the newspapers and have heard of them on the news. Still, sometimes I want to ask her to explain to me what she means by 'that sort of a thing' as if it is something so terrible that it does not deserve a name, as if it is so unclean that it cannot be termed love'. (89)

Apparently undaunted by the social scorn and pariah perception of this strange love affair, both lovebirds seem to savour the delights of their romance:

That evening, the phone rings and if I had answered, it would have been Mama on the line. But instead, I remain with Gloria, allowing her to trace her fingers across my brows allowing her to trace my lips with her own. She runs her fingers down my belly, lifting my blouse slightly, hardly a lift at all. And then her hand is travelling lower, and I feel myself lightening, and I feel the pounding all over me. (90)

With Gloria Oke now in America, she has begun making arrangements for Nnenna to join her over there. Nnenna who works as a teacher at Government Girls' College Abuloma is deeply charmed by the prospect of reuniting with Gloria Oke in America where their love affair even has a legal stamp of approval and where she would be able to pursue her dreams and take a wild chance at life. With the support of Gloria Oke who has offered to bankroll her movement



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to America, she begins the herculean process of visa application. Her visa applications have been serially declined:

The next morning another bus arrived. It took us from Warri to Lagos. I made it just in time for the interview. Not that leaving in advance made much difference in the end: as with the two previous interviews, my application was denied. (86)

Owing to the difficulty in attaining a resident American visa, Nnenna, at the instance of her lover Gloria Oke, applies for student visa where she proposes to go and study Environmental Engineering in America. According to her, just like the first visa interview, she says that her decision to study Environmental Engineering is to be useful on return to the recurring menace of oil spillage in the Niger Delta.

Chinelo Okparanta reveals the obvious disdain with which Americans view Africans and anything from Africa. It is obvious that interviewing officer at the embassy blatantly regards an African degree as being inferior to its American equivalent. This further illustrates the superior/inferior schema which best describes the relationship between Africa and the West:

And then the man told me how foolish I was for expecting that a job would be waiting for me in America. I held an African degree; was I unaware of this? How could I even hope to compete with all the other job applicants who would probably not be from an African country, whose degrees would certainly be valued more than any Nigerian degree ever would? (96)

Chinelo Okparanta reflects the myth of America being a sort of a utopic Eldorado that affords all immigrants all the luxuries and lush comforts of this world just for the asking. Migrants believe that America has answers to every riddle of life. This Nigerian mentality and conception of America is succinctly captured in the story:

Perhaps, having made a life for himself here in Nigeria, he, too, has begun to adopt the Nigerian mentality. Perhaps, he, too, has begun to see the US the way most Nigerians do: as an abstraction, a sort of utopia, a place where you go for answers, a place that always has those answers waiting for you. (101)

This mentality and conception of America as a sort of utopia is pervasive among Nigerian migrants who are ready to do anything to gain entry into the US. However, the stark reality dawns when they eventually arrive in America. The deprivations and challenges that have come to characterise immigrant life roll out before them and the spurious conception of America as a sort of utopia is immediately supplanted by a raft of dystopic realities of alienation, displacement, rootlessness, hybridity, nostalgia and the longing for return. Okparanta espouses the delusions that are harboured by Nigerians whose escapist tendencies deceive them that all they require for a life of comfort and ease is the *green card* that admits them into America:

'I don't intend to get lost in America', I say more confidently than I feel. Because even as I say it, there is a part of me that is afraid that I will want to get lost into America. There is a part of one hoping that one will find that new life much less complicated, much more trouble-free than the one here. (102)

Nnenna is after several denials eventually handed the green card that would admit her into her new world, where it looks as if as soon as you arrive its shores, a genie pops out and offers to



grant all your wishes. But no sooner was she handed the visa than she discovered that her delusions had begun to wane:

I scratch my arm with the edges of the green card. I think of the possibilities, of the many ways which I might profit from the card. I am still scratching and making plans for America when I drift into sleep. The story should end there, but it doesn't. A person wishes for something so long that when it finally happens, she would be nothing but grateful. What sympathy can we have for someone who after wanting something so badly for three long years, realises almost as soon as she has gotten it that perhaps she's been wrong in wanting it all that time. (104)

"America" is one of the stories in Okparanta's that eloquently distils the diasporic experience and the dystopia that often characterises the labyrinth that is America.

Spousal Abuse and the Frustrations of Immigrant Life

"Shelter" is another story in the collection about a nameless couple who have moved to the United States of America on the husband's student visa who is studying for an engineering degree at Boston University. The marriage is a loveless union that is characterised by assault and constant spousal abuse by a husband who is presumably overwhelmed by the strain and stress of an immigrant life in America. The husband is a habitual wife-beater and batterer who assaults the wife and their twelve-year-old middle school daughter at the slightest provocation. He often beats them to a pulp without rhyme or reason:

I was gawking at the screen when I heard the jingling of papa's key. Suddenly his voice was booming, and mama's little voice was countering; but it was hardly a counter at all. When she finally came out of the room, there was blood dribbling down one side of her lips. Papa followed her, shouting and flailing his hands. (109)

This magnitude of domestic violence reeks of or could emanate from the psychological effects of despair, displacement and loss of sanity arising from diasporic woes. This argument is premised on an incident in which the man beats his wife for failing to cook dinner and she attributes her failure to the fact that she has lost track of time in America:

'Is it the effect America is having on you?' he shouted. 'Did you ever lose track of time in America? All of a sudden you are losing track of time! I'll teach you a lesson on losing track of time. (113)

The spousal abuse and assault took a toll on both mother and daughter to the extent that they have contemplated returning home to Nigeria: "Surely, we still had a family in Nigeria. Couldn't we simply return home to them, and leave papa?" (120). "Shelter" tells a story that describes a general trend among immigrant Nigerians who look to America to provide them with a sort of shelter from the woes of life but often realise that the search for shelter in the diaspora is a fruitless one and often opt for return to their land. The trend of escapism among Nigerians is what often leads to migration in the first place as a foray in search of the Golden Fleece and happiness but they soon realise the illusion about it all. This scenario apparently informs the title of the collection in the story titled "Grace" where Okparanta remarks:



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'Happiness is like water,' she says, 'we're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers' (144).

In the final analysis, it is appropriate to observe that the above statement from which the title of the collection is drawn summarises Okparanta's underlying argument on diasporic search for happiness and the Golden Fleece which is often blighted by unhappiness and the longing to return home. It is worth noting at this point that Okparanta's narratives about the diaspora distil the phenomenon of return from the hostland to the homeland as most of the protagonists who engaged in the search for happiness in the American diaspora only discover it is as elusive as water and ultimately opt to return home.

Conclusion

William Safran, in his article entitled "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" maintains that return is a key element in the diasporic paradigm because expatriates continue to nurture a "collective memory" of their motherland and according to him their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a society. Robin Cohen in aligning with Safran's theory of collective memory agrees that members of the diaspora retain a collective memory of their original homeland; they idealize their ancestral home and continue to relate to that homeland. Okparanta has amply demonstrated in *Happiness, Like Water* that America and its promise of the Golden Fleece and as the land of opportunity may well be a mirage and as illusive and slippery as water, at least, for most African immigrants.

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