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Straddling the Borders: Displacement and Self-reinvention in Dinaw Mangestu's *All Our Names*

على جانبي الحدود، النزوح وإعادة التجديد الذاتي لديناو منجيسنو
في قصة كل أسماننا

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Abstract:

The burgeoning dissatisfaction towards the prevalent status quo in most of post independent African countries urges many young people to look for opportunities beyond their geographical borders. Dinaw Mangestu's latest novel *All Our Names* introduces us to a hybrid piece of literature. Placing the human experience at the forefront of all subjects, Mangestu's fiction departs from the traditional binary Center/ Periphery discourse.

Moving from Africa to America requires crossing borders, which leads to transgressing spaces. Unlike other migrant experiences, Isaac relinquishes the idea of returning back to his home country. By doing so, the protagonist undergoes critical situations where his identity put to the test. This research sheds light on the dilemma of displacement and the need to establish a new life abroad, which drives the protagonist to sink his own roots profoundly while being on a

shaky ground. It tackles the globalized features of the modern world as lived by those immigrants.

Keywords: Borders, identity, displacement, spaces

المخلص:

يجبر عدم الرضا المتزايد والساند في معظم البلدان الإفريقية بعد الاستقلال الشباب على البحث عن فرص تتجاوز حدودهم الجغرافية، أحدث رواية للكاتب ديناو مانجيسو بعنوان كل اسمائنا تعرفنا على قطعة من الأدب الهجين، حيث أن خيال مانجيسو يضع التجربة الإنسانية في طليعة كل المواضيع، وبذلك يتجاوز الخطاب الثنائي التقليدي بين المركز واللاحق.

الانتقال من إفريقيا إلى أمريكا يتطلب عبورا للحدود، الأمر الذي يؤدي إلى انتهاك فضاءات أخرى، وعلى عكس تجارب المهاجرين الأخرى يتخلى البطل عن العودة إلى الوطن الأم، وبناء على هذا الفعل يخضع البطل لتجارب حرجة أين وضعت هويته تحت الاختبار، ويسلط هذا البحث الضوء على معضلة النزوح، ومن ثم الحاجة إلى بناء حياة جديدة في الخارج، الأمر الذي يدفع البطل إلى الضرب بجذوره عميقا أثناء وجوده على أرض مهزوزة، أنه يتناول ميزات المعولمة للعالم الحديث كما تعاش من طرف المهاجرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحدود؛ الهوية؛ النزوح؛ فضاء.

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INTRODUCTION

The protagonist in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* recalls:

What was it my father used to say? A bird stuck between two branches gets bitten on both wings. I would like to add my own saying to the list now, Father: a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough. (Mengestu 228)

Dinaw Mangestu's works shed light on the sinews of the migratory experience, mainly as it is lived by those immigrants abroad. Crossing borders does not entail only the physical act of

moving from one area to another. However, this action embodies a wide range of complicated issues ranging from differences in the host culture, race to the labyrinths of identity. Hence, transgressing spaces that are supposed to be booked for certain category can disrupt the very being of the migrant per se since it leaves him with fewer choices.

Dinaw Mangestu's *All Our Names* latest novel dives deeply inside the everyday life of immigrants. It sometimes offers solutions to overcome this hardship. Isaac the protagonist has given up all the names his parents have once given him. This expounds the dilemma of migration as well as it reflects an aspect of the author's experience as an Ethiopian American immigrant. Both main characters Isaac and Helen indicate a sort of difference, outcasts inside their homelands, unlike the conventions and standards of their societies Uganda and the US respectively.

The voice of change is there before the encounter for both characters. Throughout the novel, it becomes self-evident that only true love and friendship can heal the cracks and strengthens connections between individuals regardless of names, race, gender and place.

1. Space and Identity in Dinaw Mangestu's *All Our Names*

All through the novel, the author alternates between two narrators Isaac in Uganda and Helen in the USA. Such an overlapping between the two implies the intersection of both spaces simultaneously. Many African countries got their freedom as Uganda in the 1970s. However, the hope of getting a better life vanishes. It turns to what Jose Fanon uttered on the phone to her friend Assia Djebbar upon seeing the Algerian demonstrations of 1988 "Oh Frantz, the wretched of the earth again"(Fanon X). This is mainly due to corruption and

individual attempts for wealth ambitions by the African dictators.

Along the same vein, the Midwestern of the US was not a peaceful place at that time. The civil rights movement was actively struggling against segregation and discrimination on the basis of race and color. Henceforward, it is evident that there are different forms of struggle and liberation in both spaces.

The sociopolitical issues motivate people across the African continent to flee their countries. Crossing the borders plea crossing spaces. Today's world is a place where one can hardly stick to one abode, and only few can claim a unique and sole identity. Consequently, the awareness that one can only assert one space and one identity would be restricted, especially taking into account the conditions accompanying the perpetual displacement.

The narrator in *All Our Names* leaves everything behind as a result of the upheavals in home country and flees to Uganda for the sake of fulfilling his ambitions and aspiration. He surrenders his names behind just as his bus crosses the borders. For him, home is a space of violations that preserves the hierarchies of private and public spaces. This necessitates the abandonment of it as an older form of belonging in order to find a more secure space that can meet his goals and dreams.

After reaching Uganda, Isaac in the African part wants to quench a thirst inside him. He uninterruptedly seeks for the vast and limitless space in his mind. However, according to him even the new space he has just reached is still a small one. According to Isaac in *All Our Names* "Kampala was too small for what I imagined. That city belonged to Uganda, but the capital as long as it was nameless, had no such allegiances. Like me, it belonged to no one, and anyone could claim it" (Mengestu 23).

This further denotes the state of dissatisfaction for Isaac upon reaching Uganda. It is from the very beginning that Isaac indicates a sort of change. He is never like his peers, as he does not like to study politics. Unlike everyone in the university, Isaac prefers literature instead. His inclination for reading the novels of the English novelist Charles Dickens opens the door for his belief of a borderless world. Just like literature, Isaac does not feel he belongs to anyone. However, any one can claim it. These ambivalent feelings take us to Edward Said' description of the modern period as "spiritually orphaned and alienated" (173).

The imagination of the limitless, the borderless and the vast heralds for a more intricate visualization of space. Such a depiction may go hand in hand with what Bhabha suggests as "to live somehow beyond the border of our times" (6). Auxiliary, this strengthens the idea that social relations and social spaces can surpass national borders i.e. geographic spaces leaving the strict geographic containers of nation-states behind.

In this regard, *All Our Names* can be taken as an exploration of identity problems in the postmodern age where one's identity stretches beyond the confines of the national borders. Diaspora is an identity bypass. The new spaces of contact and interaction may arise from the very act of crossing the borders; the notion of identity is never the same. In a way or another, it goes far beyond the traditional linear order of construction and belonging.

Bhabha goes further in tackling this liminal channel between here and there on the basis of location. According to him, this can lead to cultural hybridity that regales any sort of difference. Furthermore, it is free from any impositions and hierarchies (13). He highlights the cultural location rather than the political one, and the former's benefits in yielding a common ground for

the encounters. This can ultimately repair or reinforce the old self vis-à-vis its metamorphoses. Such maintenance and reinforcement of the self are well expressed by Edward Said in his book *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. He describes the discontinuous characteristics of exile as the exiles have been uprooted from their soil and past. Therefore; they feel an urgent need to reconstruct their shattered lives (173).

What Isaac undertakes during his perpetual displacement and crossing of borders (spaces) to reach the USA represents the interstices of immigration, which in turn constantly obfuscate the notions of identity and belonging. The narrator never reveals his true name, as well as his identity. As we skip the pages hoping to find his true identity and name, yet he keeps himself anonymous. This mysterious man amplifies the intricacies of identity; he is nameless though he succeeds in making social relations with the other.

2. Binary vs. Periphery from spatial perspective

Bhabha stresses the fact that in the process of displacement, “the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting”(13).

Consequently, this implies that the occupation of another’s space is not an easy endeavor. The famous shriek that the child utters in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is expressive for a better understanding “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”(84). From a little child, such a shriek seems innocent. However, it is a product of a whole society where the Negro does not belong to the human race anymore. It

encapsulates the bitter truth no matter what Fanon tries to amuse himself in order to balance the space.

Like Fanon, Isaac realizes that the USA is not the Promised Land. Abhorrence of the other is circumambulated by a wide range of stereotypes, which leads both characters to the dead end. In a society where the black is associated with every bad thing, both characters perpetually fail to reveal their love and relationship in front of everyone. It is there where Isaac discovers his blackness the cursed body. With reference to W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *Souls of Black Folk*, double consciousness arises in an atmosphere where “one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”(38). The very simple act of going with Helen to the diner for lunch in a divided USA Midwestern town between black and white would be full of dangers. The diner represents a micro white space precluded the new comer similar to the transplant rejection. This was well put by Frantz Fanon “I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea” (84).

Moreover, the compelling nature of the past is unavoidable. Isaac never forgets his past. Those memories of home and the work he left unfinished keep triggering his screen of mind every time. Said addresses this ambivalent as well as dual nature of exile by stating that “the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (173). Throughout the course of the novel, it becomes self-evident that both characters share many things though they come from different backgrounds. This is exactly what Bhabha highlights as that negotiation is better understood on the level of culture,

rather than political power. Through cultural negotiation, a common ground can be built, which can result in a liminal space. A third voice can transpire to link the supposedly opposites. As far as Bhabha's postcolonial milieu is concerned, cultural differences and the theoretical translations of those differences can pave the way to the proclamation of new voices and new languages in these negotiations. The Third Space is the one that "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (55).

It is only through cultural negotiation that different social spaces overlap and merge to create a new space of understanding and acceptance. Both characters come to such a conclusion, as they decided to move by car without any prior arrangements. It is neither happy nor sad moments. What matters is just being together at the moment regardless of differences.

3. The shift towards more self-reflective themes

After independence in most of the African countries, a plethora of issues floated on the surface ranging from the problem of language to the intricacies of building the newly born nations. The split between whether or not to use the colonizer's language as a medium to express the African culture, values and attitudes has gained momentum debates. Ngugi advocates the use of the indigenous languages to express the indigenous cultures and behaviors, while Achebe supports the domesticated use of English for getting a heard voice around the world. Yet both agree on the nationalist priorities in the face of the colonizer and the threat of imperialism. Recently, a shift in emphasis has taken place where the issue of language has been surpassed to target more self-reflexive themes that are related to the issue of identity and belonging in a shaky world. The new

African authors are more aware of themselves as they start to deflect from what the Nigerian Novelist Chimamnda Ngozie Adichie warns about in a TED talk as the dangers of the single-story.

Most of the current generation of the African writers have travelled or have spent time studying and writing outside of the African continent. Their works are on the top of the bestselling literatures around the world. The African novel is no longer the anti-European one. A shift in emphasis occurs where the African authors focus more on internal issues and dilemmas. Mwangi Evan in his book *Africa Writes Back to Self* explains, “contemporary African novelists resort to self-reflexive devices to signify a state of being in postcolonial African societies rather than to retaliate against, parody, or negate Western discourses”(4). In a liquid world, globalization is a prevalent phenomenon where the transnational text acquires impetus success.

All Our Names is as intricate as the theme of identity itself. Mengestu tends to alternate between two intersecting storylines Uganda and the Midwest of the US. He includes two narrators rather than one. This supports the idea of being the citizen of the world. The novel seems like a ball of intersected white and black threads, which adds a sort of novelty to the work.

Both men in the African storyline of the novel are called Isaac which augments more ambiguity to the events. Sometimes it is hardly intricate to split between the two. Are they one and the same? Such ambiguous style is as complicate as the notion of identity per se. Unlike the traditional African novels, *All Our Names* has no linear start or end. Both storylines overlap in a way that the geographical spaces are completely vanished. We can find Isaac in the Midwest of the USA and Uganda at the

same time. This ultimately elucidates the author's view of space as limitless and open.

Furthermore, taboos are being constantly transgressed by the author unlike the traditional African novels. There are many situations where references to sexual scenes are meticulously depicted. This disrupts the very core idea of the protection of women as lands from the rapists.

Throughout the novel, metafiction is incorporated through the text on many instances. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator reveals his intention to be a writer since he clearly expresses his vocation to literature and Victorian novels. He does not want to study politics like the majority at the university. The ambiguity in splitting between the narrator and the character Isaac further strengthens the intention of the author to reflect himself throughout the chapters. This is clear, especially when Isaac compares the narrator with a professor, which is the fact. As far as the African fiction is concerned, such novels are a clear call for a more self-reflexive narrative that focuses on the postmodern issues.

Conclusion

The title of the novel denotes instability and constant change. Throughout Isaac's journey, a plethora of names can be adapted, so as identities to cope with the new circumstances. Dinaw Mengestu's *All Our Names* bears a clear call for a more flexible understanding of the notion of identity as far as the current vicissitudes in the postmodern world are concerned. All the way through the chapters, it becomes evident that the resurrecting power of the past never leaves the protagonist. Moreover, it keeps exerting itself massively on the new lives of the characters. However, for Isaac, the idea of home is never the

same. He is stuck between the atrocities of an old home, and the racial discrimination that he continuously faces in the new one. Isaac incessantly works towards finding a comfort zone, which he never attains.

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