

RETHINKING AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS' IDENTITY: AFROPOLITANISM IN TEJU COLE'S *OPEN CITY* AND TAIYE SELASI'S *GHANA MUST GO*

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Abstract

The representation of the postcolonial African identity has always been the concern of African creative writers and scholars. For decades, Afro-pessimism and postcolonial Manicheism have been paradigms that prevail in the African literary landscape. This paper seeks to delineate how Afropolitanism attempts to optimistically rethink the African identity outside crises. Postcolonial theory lays the contextual grounds for this analysis with Selasi's "Bye-Bye Babar" (2005) and Mbembe's "Afropolitanism" (2007). The study of Cole's and Selasi's novels first unveils that the cosmopolitan status of Africans is partly due to their search for home as they peregrinate elsewhere to escape the postcolony in their country of origin. Second, the Afropolitans are identified with multiple identities and also multilingual as they are culturally and linguistically hybrids. The paper finally claims that Afropolitanism remains paradoxical for, it reinforces Eurocentrism and lacks political engagement to fight Neo-colonialism for the true liberation of Africa.

Key Words: Afropolitanism, Diaspora, Identity, Migration, Postcolonialism, Postcolony.

Résumé

La représentation de l'identité postcoloniale africaine a toujours été au cœur des écrits des intellectuels africains. Pendant des décennies, l'afro-pessimisme et le manichéisme postcolonial ont prévalu dans la littérature africaine. Ce travail révèle comment l'Afropolitanisme tente de repenser de manière optimiste l'identité africaine au-delà des crises raciales et culturelles. La théorie postcoloniale pose les fondements contextuels de cette analyse tout en recourant à « Bye-Bye Babar » de Selasi (2005) et à « Afropolitanisme » de Mbembe (2007). L'étude des romans de Cole et Selasi d'abord révèle que les Africains cosmopolites sont à la recherche d'un chez-soi alors qu'ils pèrègrinent ailleurs pour échapper à la « Postcolonie » dans leur pays d'origine. Ensuite, les Afropolitains sont identifiés à des identités multiculturelles et aussi multilingues. L'analyse soutient enfin que l'Afropolitanisme reste paradoxal, car il renforce l'eurocentrisme et manque d'engagement politique pour lutter contre le néo-colonialisme pour la véritable libération de l'Afrique.

Mots clés: Afropolitanisme, Diaspora, Identité, Migration, Postcolonialisme, Postcolonie.

Introduction

Firstly coined by the Ghanaian-Nigerian writer, Taiye Selasi in her paper "Bye-Bye Babar" Afropolitans are "the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes" (T. Selasi, 2005, online). While Afropolitanism from a Selasian approach is used to name a generation of the diaspora who had grown up between several global metropolises, speaking multiple languages,

engaging with African and non-African cultures, the neologism for Achille Mbembe refers to “the presence of elsewhere in the here” that is, the interweaving of worlds caused by the movement of Black and non-Black people in, out and throughout Africa. (A. Mbembe, 2020: 59). Mbembe’s understanding of Afropolitanism counters Selasi’s vision in the sense that Afropolitanism for the Cameroonian scholar takes into account intra-Africa migration contrary to Selasi’s orientation that only considers Africans outside the continent. However, Afropolitanism from both sides redefines what it means to be African in the current globalized world.

This paper, therefore, seeks to delineate how Afropolitanism gives a new perspective in the representation of the African identity in the works of the newest African writers focusing on Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*. The choice of the two novels is justifiable by the fact that *Open City* and *Ghana Must Go* are said to be prototypes of Afropolitan novels. The authors themselves, despite their belonging to the same generation, are read as Afropolitans. The choice of Cole and Selasi’s novels is not a marginalization of Tsitsi Dagarembga’s (1988) *Nervous Conditions*, Amma Darko’s (1991) *Beyond the Horizon*, or more recent Chimamanda N. Adichie’s works and other migration works known as *classics* of African migration literature. Though they are Afropolitan works, those novels have not been analyzed from that perspective by critics. If Adichie can be considered the leading figure of this new generation, her works are analyzed by André Kaboré who suggests she should be referred to as a writer of “inter-national literature”. (A. Kaboré, 2016: 16). Kaboré makes use of return migration theory while reading Adichie from an Afrocentric perspective.

In a dissertation, Hicham Gourgem resorts to the concepts of “Afropolitanism” and “Afropeanism” to explore the theoretical and ideological interests of contemporary African cultural identity. As he associates Cole’s *Open City* and other Afropolitan novels, Gourgem avers those Afropean and Afropolitan novels are instantiations of a paradigm of cultural dialogue that privileges Western culture in contemporary redefinitions of African identities. *Beyond Afropolitanism: Representations of African Identities in Select 21st Century African Novels* (2021:).

Contrary to Gourgem whose analysis is based on Selasi’s vision of Afropolitanism as expressed in “Bye-Bye Babar”, Ashleigh Harris, has provided an analysis based on Mbembe’s Afropolitanism. In his work, Harris suggests that despite the international success of the best-known Afropolitan writers like Chimamanda N. Adichie, Teju Cole, and NoViolet Bulawayo, caution should be exercised before hailing these individual successes as evidence of African literature’s broader recognition in the world stage (A. Harris, 2019). On this point, Harris joins

Gourgem when she evokes the failure of Afropolitan discourses to “balance the stories” between Africa and the West as wished by Achebe in *Home and Exile*. If Gourgem and Harris have been hostile to the notion of Afropolitanism in their works, Aretha Phiri, rather reveals that Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* offers a more nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the complex condition of Afropolitan subject than does her essay “Bye-Bye Babar”. (A. Phiri, 2017). For her, there is a considerable gap between Selasi’s description of the Afropolitan in her essay and the representation she makes of it in her debut novel. If the Afropolitan vision as expressed by Selasi in “Bye-Bye Babar” has been caustically criticized by the reading public, Phiri rather demonstrates how well-founded Afropolitanism is by suggesting a re-reading of *Ghana Must Go* and also a redefinition of what it means to be Afropolitan beyond what has been demonstrated by critics so far. Along with Phiri, this paper resorts to both Selasi’s and Mbembe’s understanding of Afropolitanism, focussing on the convergences in their reflection that redefine the African identity. It argues that the suggested reforms of Afropolitanism to rethink African (immigrants’) identity are paradoxical.

Despite the use of Afropolitanism as a theory, while resorting to Selasi’s “Bye-Bye Babar” (2005) and Mbembe’s “Afropolitanism” (2007), the paper also makes use of Postcolonialism as its theoretical framework. Homi Bhabha’s concept of “Hybridity” is of paramount importance in the understanding of the Afropolitan identity. The analysis is built around three main pillars. It first shows how African immigrants’ search for homes results in a hostile reception in the West. Second, the work presents the Afropolitan identity as the celebration of Hybridity as it blends the *here* and the *there*. The paper eventually questions the Afropolitan ideology. It argues that despite the Afro-optimistic vision advocated by the proponents of Afropolitanism, it remains illusory in the redefinition of the African identity

1. African Immigration and the Unfriendly Welcome in the West

The migration of Africans to the West is motivated by diverse driven factors. Those factors range from poverty to unemployment and most importantly insecurity issues in most postcolonial African states. Cole and Selasi have put special stress on the issue of insecurity in Africa that prompts their respective characters to leave their homeland. In Cole’s *Open City*, insecurity which is a postcolonial reality is embodied by a minor character, Saidu. He is a Liberian illegal immigrant Julius, the main protagonist, and his girlfriend Nadège met in a detention center during their visit. As an illegal, he has been arrested and he is waiting to be deported. Saidu tells his traumatizing story about his experience of the Liberian war: “His mother and her sister were shot in the second war, by Charles Taylor’s men. Two days later,

the men returned and took him away with them, to the outskirts of Monrovia.”(T. Cole, 2011: 65). As a teenage boy, he is taken to a camp and rather than making him a child soldier, Taylor’s men make him work on a rubber farm with about fifty other children. War in Africa has two direct consequences on children: child soldiers and child labor. Saidu and his other schoolmates have to drop out of school, for the school itself « had been shelled and burned to the ground in 1994. » They are forced to work in rubber plantations in very scarce conditions.

The indirect impact of war revealed in the narrative of *Open City* is migration. Working in the camp, Saidu’s dream of America has led him to escape the dehumanizing treatment he experiences in the camp. In Saidu’s search for refuge, he has to go through internal migration. His journey starts with his movement from Liberia to Guinea, then to Mali, and ends up in Morocco. Saidu with other sub-Saharan Africans, namely Malians, Senegalese, Nigeriens, and Ghanaians move to Tangier northern Morocco, then to Ceuta. “Ceuta as the Ghanaian had said was Spain” (T. Cole, p.68). The journey continues with intra-Europe migration for Saidu in his way of Asylum seeking. In Spain, he crosses the border into Portugal where he endures hard work for two years before saving enough money to fly into New York. When he reaches New York, officers take him away. “I don’t want to go back anywhere, he said. I want to stay in this country, I want to be in America and work. I applied for asylum but it wasn’t given. Now they will return e to my port of entry, which is Lisbon.” (70)

Like Cole’s character Saidu, Selasi also makes satire of the situation of political instability in Nigeria which has prompted Fola to leave the country and migrate to the United States. Fola, like Saidu, is read as an exiled and displaced woman. As a child in Nigeria, she suffers the traumatic murder of her father in the Nigerian war in 1966 and is later sent to Accra, Ghana, by her father’s partner at the law firm. In Accra, Fola would attend Ghana International School and after finishing her studies at this school, she gets a scholarship that enables her to relocate to the United States. Upon examining both Saidu and Fola, it is evident that war or political instability in Africa leads to the migration of young Africans to the West. Antony Otieno Ong’ayo has scrutinized the link between political instability in West Africa and immigration, he has concluded that the issue of political instability in Africa is directly related to migration. “Many people are on the move as asylum seekers or refugees in several countries. They are escaping from civil wars, and oppressive regimes working in cohorts with external special interests, especially in countries endowed with natural resources.” (A. Ong’ayo, 2008, p. 8). It is clear that those states are just experiencing what Achille Mbembe refers to as “Postcolony”. This notion also takes into account a given historical trajectory, that of a society

recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence that the colonial relationship involves. The Cameroonian theorist goes further when he avers:

On the other hand, war, where it occurs, does not necessarily lead, as once in Europe, to the development of the state apparatus or monopolization by the state of the use of force within its borders. In current circumstances, there is nothing automatic about the link between war and the emergence of an undisputed central power. But what is true is that this military activity will be one means by which new models of domination will take shape on the continent. (A. Mbembe, 2001, p. 88)

The implication of Western countries in war and political conflicts in Africa is what Mbembe tries to denounce. African immigrants are thus in search of a kind of shelter in Europe or America and most of them as Cole's narrative reveals are « asylum seekers ». Both *Ghana Must Go* and *Open City* tackle this issue from children's perspectives. Fola and Saidu as children flee their different countries to relocate elsewhere. Insecurity in the "Poscolony" is therefore a reason that triggers Africans to seek the Eldorado elsewhere. Nevertheless, the shelter so desired is far from welcoming most of the African immigrants who have to face Western Hegemony.

African immigrants' victim of inhospitality in the West is manifest through racism and other forms of injustice based on race. In Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, Kweku Sai the main character, has to face racism in the professional domain. As the novel reveals Kweku leaves Ghana and later becomes a very reputed doctor, a surgeon in Boston, the United States. He has succeeded in creating what resembles a successful life for his wife, and their four children. But Kweku is unfortunately fired and blacklisted in the medical community in the whole country after a failed surgery. His dismissal from the medical community has not only been a racist act but also the result of the cupidity of the white president of the hospital where he works. In addition, the Cabots have shown a racist reaction to seeing Kweku as the best-suggested surgeon to operate on their relative. One can note from his reaction that as black and African Kweku is supposed not to be qualified to be a good surgeon. Kip Cabot is the one who even refuses to believe his sister's surgery is going to be carried out by a surgeon of African descent. The following passage better expresses the Cabots' reaction,

The Cabots looked at Kweku, then back at the president. "A word," they said politely, then moved into the hall. Kip Cabot, losing his hearing, spoke too loudly for the acoustics. [As Kip Cabot shouts] "But he's a—" [But the president reassures him] "Very fine surgeon. The finest we have." (T. Selasi, 2013, p. 74)

In the United States, African surgeons are discriminated against. White people do not trust their professional qualifications when it comes to operating on some of their sick parents. Even though hospital authorities try to reassure them that such African medical doctors are as good as Western specialists, the white community remains dubious. This is the case in *Ghana Must Go* by Selasi where

Kweku is victimized by his blackness and African origin. “And where did you do your ‘training’?” (Selasi, 2013, p. 74). That question is not just like Kip wants to satisfy his curiosity, he is ironically stipulating that he does not believe in Kweku’s professional abilities as a surgeon. To Kip’s question, Kweku who finds it humiliating answers that he has been trained “in the jungle, on beats [...] Chimpanzees taught. Great instructors. Who knew?”(Selasi, 2013, p. 74). Kip’s question is ironically asked and Kweku has also provided an ironic answer.

Racism and violence against (Black) African immigrants in the West is also a preoccupying issue in Cole’s *Open City*. The protagonist Farouq, a North African immigrant, and tenant of a restaurant/bar Julius met in Brussels has been victimized by racial discrimination as a student in Belgium. Through the narrative, Farouq is portrayed as a failed student who has erected himself as an autodidact. Farouq thought that Europe would be a hospitable place as he has experienced the dictatorship of the king in his original country Morocco been disenchanted once in Europe. “I dreamed of Europe; we all did, my friends and I. But I have been disappointed. Europe only looks free.”(T. Cole, 2011, p. 122). Here, Farouq is disenchanted when he realizes that what he has thought of Europe is far from being true. African immigrants are mostly faced with Western hegemony which according to H. K. Bhabha leads to discrimination and racism to which the colonized are summited in the West. Bhabha (1994, p. 95) writes: “The function of ambivalence as one of the most significant discursive and psychological strategies of discriminatory power – whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan – remains to be charted.” Farouq and other African immigrants have experienced the subaltern condition in Belgium. As a student, Farouq has been a victim of his subaltern condition. The rejection of his Master’s thesis is evidence of the Western stereotypical perception of the African émigré. “The department rejected my thesis. On what grounds? Plagiarism. They gave no reason. They just said I would have to submit another one in twelve months.” (T. Cole, 2011, p. 128).

Both Selasi and Cole have depicted racism as a fundamental hindrance to the integration of African immigrants into Western societies. If Selasi emphasizes racism in the professional sphere, Cole has rather denounced this unjust treatment in the academic setting. Despite the unfriendly welcome of African immigrants in Western countries, the discourse of Afropolitanism tries to portray the diasporic African beyond the racial and cultural clashes.

2. Blending the *Here* and the *There*: the Afropolitan Identity

In the novels written by Selasi and Cole, Afropolitanism seems to be an antidote to racial discrimination and hatred campaigns geared against African immigrants living in the West,

especially in the United States. Afropolitanism succeeds in fighting against racial differences and otherness because it is a philosophy that suppresses hierarchical positions through a system of coalesced paradigms. It blends the most opposed essentialist identities. The Afropolitan identity shows that the hegemonic identities which used to denigrate the supposed peripheral ethnicities should all silence their differences in a holistic partnership.

Selasi and Cole's novels offer an understanding of the Afropolitan identity through their different characters. Having an Afropolitan identity suggests that one has a hybrid status; from African fathers to hybrid mothers for example. This is the case of Fola in *Ghana Must Go*. Her father is of Igbo origin. Fola likes Yoruba local foods. She also speaks many languages: local languages plus French, Swahili, Arabic, and Twi, a Ghanaian local language. Her father Olukayodé (Kayo) Savage known as very erudite realized the importance of communication in a multilingual (post)colonial setting advised Fola to "[a]lways learn the local language. Never let on to the locals, which can be seen as evidence of his view on the general population" (T. Selasi, 2013, pp.101-102). In this case, Afropolitanism means being of a hybrid identity and embracing multiculturalism, especially speaking many languages.

Afropolitanism also suggests the adoption of African cultural values, especially wearing clothes with both African and Western artistic patterns. Being Afropolitan is likened to wearing hybrid clothes with either African and European designs or artistic intelligence from Africa and Europe. This is the case of Fola who wears multicultural clothes. She dresses with a mix of Western clothes she obtains from Goodwill and combines these with a "gold-flecked asooke, the Nigerian cloth. Nigerians were far more artful than Ghanaians with their head wraps" (Selasi, 2013, p.53).

In this transcultural atmosphere, Fola can be involved in some transnational activities. The narrative reveals that she is capable of making "the something-from-nothingness, the making of the best of it, an ode to Halloween, her most favorite of rites, what with spirits in costume and giving of gifts" (Selasi, 2013, p.154). She is happy to draw a likeness to a "Yoruba fetish ceremony, with candy" (Selasi, 2013, p.154). Fola claims a connection with her African past, when her last child was born she insisted on the order of the names by "sovereignty over naming [...] (first name: Nigerian, middle name: Ghanaian, third name: Savage, last name: Sai)" (T. Selasi, 2013, p.18).

Afropolitanism also means a hybrid education given to children. It consists in giving a good Western education to one's African children. Kweku, the patriarch of the Sais is described as an African who has acquired some Western values. In his way of managing his family, Kweku assimilates a Western attitude as to the luxury he provides for the needs of his family.

This is indeed contradictory if one considers his education received in Ghana. As the patriarch of the family, he does not want his children to lack anything: “The hours he worked were an expression of his affection, in direct proportion to his commitment to keeping them well: well educated, well traveled, well regarded by other adults. [...] What he wanted, and what he wasn’t, as a child” (T. Selasi: 47). Nevertheless, Kweku’s life is characterized by more or less alienating hybridity, to the extent that the cultural syncretism he sought did not work as he would have liked. Despite his medical reputation until then being impeccable, he is finally rejected for being African, a pawn that the hospital administration after using it got rid of to avoid being sued. The four children of the Sai family also present some Afropolitan identities. Olu (Olukayodé) the elder son becomes an excellent orthopaedic surgeon, walking in the footsteps of his father. He loves reading Chinua Achebe and always claims his African origin though he was born and grew up in the States. Olu is motivated by the reconfiguration of the African outside stereotypes. He even marries a Chinese woman whose father initially is reluctant concerning their union due to the prejudices he has against Africans. He succeeds in convincing Dr. Wei, his wife Ling’s father, and breaks any stereotypical ideology concerning Africans.

Moreover, multilingualism and erudition are very fundamental in defining the Afropolitan. Teju Cole’s novel offers a deeper understanding of it through Julius and Farouq. Julius is described as a real Afropolitan not only due to his ethnicity mixed but also his erudition and ability to master Yoruba, English, German, and other languages. At the onset of the novel, his linguistic prowess is revealed when the reader discovers that Julius listens to radio stations where other languages like French, German, or Dutch are spoken. The following lines bring more details to this argumentation:

Sometimes, I even spoke the words in the book out loud to myself, and in doing so I noticed the odd way my voice mingled with the murmur of the French, German, or Dutch radio announcers, or with the thin texture of the violin strings of the orchestras, all of this intensified by the fact that whatever it was I was reading had likely been translated out of one of the European languages. (T. Cole, 2011: 5)

This extract suggests multilingualism which is a central paradigm of Afropolitanism. Julius who is a Nigerian-born American man, who lives in New York is passionate about reading and listening to the radio in diverse languages. He is even able to master some European languages. This is a piece of evidence that speaking or understanding many languages is fundamental when it comes to dealing with the Afropolitan identity.

Living in Belgium as a student and also a worker, Farouq is depicted as a very erudite person that incarnates African intellectualism in the current cosmopolitan world. The novel

reveals Farouq through the main character's Julius trip to Belgium as he is spending his holidays in the cosmopolitan city of Brussels. In their daily conversations, Julius learns more about Farouq who takes his time to bring details about his ambitions. As he can understand and speak multiple languages, Farouq dreams of becoming a translator. The following extract gives more details about his ambitions:

I have two projects, Farouq said. There is the practical one, and there's a deeper one. I asked if the practical one was his job at the shop. No, he said, not even that; the practical thing, for the long term, is my studies. I'm studying to be a translator between Arabic, English, and French, and I'm also doing some courses in media translation and subtitles for films, this kind of thing. That's how I will find a job. But my deeper project is about what I said last time, the difference thing. I strongly believe that people can live together, and I want to understand how that can happen. It happens here, on this small scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale. But as I told you, I'm an autodidact, so I don't know what form this other project will take. (T. Cole: 113)

This sense of multilingualism matches with A. Mbembe's description of the Afropolitans. He notes: « These are usually people who can express themselves in more than one language. They are developing, sometimes without their knowing it, a transnational culture which I call "Afropolitan" culture. » (A. Mbembe: 60). The Afropolitan identity, to cap it all is a valorization of the African in the globalized world. It emphasizes Africans' ability to adapt to multiple cultures and geographies. Afropolitanism presents Africans in the diaspora as equal to their host communities in terms of academic success and linguistic capacities. Therefore to be Afropolitan is to refuse to be seen as a victim while considering racial solidarity as an obsolete commitment.

However, Afropolitanism as suggested by S. Gikandi « goes far beyond the existential situations of Africans born across languages, nations, and identities. [It] reflects a new attitude towards Africa and the wider world in which it is a part.» (S. Gikandi, 2011: 10). Thus, instead of viewing the great movement of Africans to other parts of the world as detrimental, the philosophy of Afropolitanism rather instigates migration which for Mbembe is the African way of being even since pre-colonial times. (A. Mbembe, 2007).

3. A Critique of the Afropolitan Identity in the Era of Globalization

Despite the Afro-optimistic vision advocated by its proponents, Afropolitanism presents some shortcomings in redefining the African identity. The term Afropolitan is originally suggested by T. Selasi who resorts to her multicultural position and experience to explain who an Afropolitan is. In her approach, she specifies the characteristics of the Afropolitans as follows: "(we) are the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already

at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes." (T. Selasi, 2005, online). Here, the Afropolitanism inferred by Selasi only refers to a minority and an elitist class among diasporic Africans. *Ghana Must Go* is thereupon an illustration of Afropolitanism in connection with elitism. The Sai family monopolizes the diegesis of the novel. Kweku for instance is read as "an intelligent parent, too rational to pick favorites. A Man's Man, above petty insecurities. And a Well-Respected Doctor, one of the Best in his field..." (T. Selasi, 2013, p. 15). Like the patriarch Kweku, the whole Sai family is portrayed with excellent academic prowess.

Moving to a discourse that values African excellence is not a worry per se. However, an optimistic rethinking of African immigrants' identity should not be discriminatory. If having academic success is a determining factor in the consideration of the Afropolitan, what about the many African immigrants who have got no chance to go further in academic studies, but who live outside the continent and work as employees in factories or the domain of building? What is the name given to them? In effect, as one notices they represent the majority of Africans who leave the continent to the West. There is therefore a need to question Selasi's Afropolitan ideology.

Afropolitanism also neglects Neo-colonialism which is the core of the myriad of crises that affect Africa since the colonial era. There has always been a power relationship between the West and Africa. The West dominates, exploits, and controls Africa. Neo-colonialism is still in full swing in Africa. While the followers of Afropolitanism advocate syncretism, the world is under this system of domination of the West over Africa whose abolition cannot be done by the celebration of cultural hybridity. The marginalization of African realities in the Afropolitan discourse is construed in Teju Cole's narrative. In *Open City*, the advocacy of cosmopolitanism puts Africa at the margin in favor of Europe or America. Julius epitomizes the African whose cosmopolitan status (a Nigerian of Nigerian German origin living in New York) is associated with solitude in the West. From the first-person point of view, Julius gives an ever-increasing, even overwhelming, amount of detail about New York (T. Cole: 44), while providing very little information about his memories of Africa. Except for a few pages chronicling his time at the Nigerian Military School in Zaria and his father's passing (pp.76–78), Nigeria is relegated to sporadic memory pieces in the novel. This reality is admitted by Julius himself who asserts:

The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. (T. Cole, 2011, p. 155)

Through this assertion, Julius uses caustic expressions “empty space” and “great expanse of nothing” in reference to Nigeria. His incapacity to remember his African origins suggests that the Afropolitan identity fosters acculturation. According to J.W Berry, 2004 (online), acculturation “grew out of a concern for the effects of European domination of colonial and indigenous peoples.” In the process of acculturation, individuals generally experience a total change from their original culture to appropriate the culture of the new environment they have settled in. This is the case of Julius who forgets his Nigerian origins when he immigrates to the United States. These lines support his position as he explains:

The name Julius linked me to another place and was, with my passport and my skin color, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different, of being set apart, in Nigeria. I had a Yoruba middle name, Olatubosun, which I never used. That name surprised me a little each time I saw it on my passport or birth certificate, like something that belonged to someone else but had been long held in my keeping. Being Julius in everyday life thus confirmed me in my not being fully Nigerian. (T. Cole, 2011, p.78)

Therefore, Afropolitanism fails to “balance the stories” or “Move the Centre” as desired by the Nigeria scholar Chinua Achebe and the Kenyan writer when it comes to the predominance of Western stories. For Wa Thiong’o for example, African literature “will find its form and character through its reconnection with the mainstream of the struggles of African people against imperialism and itself in the rich oral traditions of peasantry” (N. Wa Thiong’o, 1986). Wa Thiong’o’s understanding of how African writers may decolonize Africa is clearly expressed in this assertion. For him, the worldwide neo-colonial forces that uphold imperialist dominance must be challenged by African writers.

The construction of an African identity outside racial and cultural crises while rejecting self-victimization is germane in the discourse of Afropolitanism. To be Afropolitan means putting an end to nationalist struggles and refusing any position of the victim of the world system as an African. In Teju Cole’s *Open City*. Two Africans living in New York are highlighted in the story to epitomize the rejection of racial solidarity; Julius and a taxi driver. The unnamed driver is angered by Julius’ attitude because he finds it hard to believe that his fellow African passenger would enter the vehicle and not act in an African manner. “You know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this?” (Cole, 2011, p. 40). Julius embodies the Afropolitan vision to put an end to racial solidarity. His refusal to apologize for the taxi driver’s complaint confirms that Afropolitanism is against any form of solidarity based on race.

The vision of such an African identity is not a problem per se, what is paradoxical and makes such an ideology subjective is when Mbembe avers:

Afropolitanism is not the same as Pan-Africanism or negritude. Afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity—which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. (A. Mbembe: 60)

Here, Mbembe suggests Afropolitanism as the attitude par excellence that should characterize Africans in this era of internationalization. For the Cameroonian scholar, nationalist movements like Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and racial solidarity are outdated. The paradox with such a position is his recognition at the same time that there are international laws that Africa undergoes in its relationship with the other, particularly with the West. His notion of « Broad-mindedness » (A. Mbembe: 60) is a beautiful discourse that minimizes the prevailing predicaments the African continent has been confronted with for decades.

Afropolitanism becomes subjective, because it encourages Africans in a state of clowns who must wear the Afropolitan mask to show the world a happy face. If Afropolitanism tries to ban racial solidarity, it should not overlook the reasons for its existence. In this perspective, K. M’Bra has produced an analysis on the limits of Afropolitanism in which he notes: “...racial solidarity is not a gathering based on the skin color as the exclusive criteria. It is a gathering of the disenfranchised of the world order. It happens that, in that system, Africa and the black diaspora are the victims.” (K. M’Bra, 2022 p.25). Of course, Africans should not be trapped in the past due to their unhappy history in their relationship with the West, but Slavery was a reality and it lasted about four centuries. Colonization in theory is abolished but it is still operating in diverse forms. Africans in this so-called era of globalization are still victims of racism, discrimination, and other forms of violence based on their race. Those realities should not be neglected for the sake of forging multiracial communities. Emma Dabiri stands in a very caustic position as she criticizes the Afropolitan ideology. She notes:

The problem is not that Afropolitans are privileged per se- rather it is that at a time when poverty remains endemic for millions, the narratives of a privileged few telling us how great everything is, how much opportunity and potential is available, may drown out the voices of a majority who remain denied basic life chance. (E. Dabiri, 2016: 106)

There are so many burdens in the continent that need to be addressed by African scholars and creative writers rather than advocating an unbalanced syncretism.

Furthermore, Multilingualism which is fundamental in the apprehension of an Afropolitan puts the Africans in a state of consumer and even promoter of European languages. The celebration of Linguistic hybridity should not only imply Africans’ zeal to master European languages. There should have reciprocity when it comes to cultural or linguistic exchange. But in Afropolitan discourse, only Africans are interested in European languages. This is the case

of Fola in *Ghana Must Go* (T. Selasi, 2013, pp.101-102) and Farouq in *Open City* (T. Cole, 2011, p.113) whose multilingual status is based on their mastering of European languages. However, it seldom happens to see Europeans or Americans being deeply involved in African cultures or even speaking some African languages like Malinke, Yoruba, Swahili, or Lingala. Why Africans in this globalized world should be determined by their ability to speak multiple languages, especially European ones? If the relationship between the West and Africa is not bilateral, with full engagement from both sides to exchange, culturally, politically economically, and even linguistically, Afropolitanism therefore reinforces Eurocentrism. The “globalized world” advocated by the West and supported by the proponent of the Afropolitan ideology, rather looks like a “Westernized world”.

Afropolitanism consequently appears as the “Westernization” of the African identity. Supporters of Afropolitanism as one observes are African intellectuals who were born in Europe or America. They have studied at some very prestigious universities in the United States or Europe. Their relationship with the West is different from the one of Africans who were born and grew up in Africa and whose relocation to the West is to have better living conditions. Those who claim to be identified as Afropolitans are benefactors of some Western prerogatives. Both Selasi and Cole have respectively attended Yale and Columbia Universities. As they currently live and work in Europe, they benefit from the advantages linked to the world system. As creative writers, the Afropolitans’ writings are influenced by Western writing techniques. Their narratives are human-centered and lack engagement in denouncing socio-political problems. In Teju Cole’s *Open City*, for example, the reader follows the main character Julius in his walks and trips. (T. Cole, 2011, p.1). He is portrayed as a tourist who wanders in New York, Belgium, and around the world. This echoes Western ways of writing since they consider literature as mere art. African literature has its particularity, which is the denunciation and the struggle against social plagues. Afropolitan discourse in this context lacks the authenticity to be a major discourse in African literature.

Conclusion

The analysis of Cole’s and Selasi’s novels reveals that Afropolitanism remains paradoxical in redefining the African immigrants’ identity. This paper has firstly offered a retrospection on the causative factors of the peregrination of Africans to other parts of the world, mainly to the West. The analysis suggests that the migration of Africans mainly youngsters to the West finds its roots in the African postcolonial state. Mbembe’s “postcolony” sheds light on instabilities and crises in postcolonial countries as fundamental reasons for peregrinating.

However, the quest for a home so desired by African immigrants in the West turns to disenchantment and despair, as they are confronted with Western hegemony. Afropolitanism tries to subvert the ongoing dichotomous relationship of the Africans with the colonizer. By promoting hybridity, cultural mix, and syncretism, Afropolitanism puts an end to nationalism and other racial ideologies when it comes to defining the current African.

The analysis suggests that the Afropolitan identity cannot be the identity *par excellence* of the new African as it is advocated by its supporters. Afropolitanism reinforces Eurocentrism, minimizes the effects of neo-colonialism, and encourages the idea of globalization that puts Africans in a position of a consumer of European norms. Globalization is not Westernization. The encounter with the other should not imply the loss of one's cultural benchmark. It should rather enrich each side. At this level one agrees with N. Wa Thiong'o when he suggests: «While there is a need for cultures to reach out to one another and borrow from one another, this has to be on the basis of equality and mutual respect.» (Wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. xvi). This will certainly permit to celebrate hybridity with dignity, for it will not only enrich Europeans but also Africans.

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