

(Re)Imagining Uganda Postcolony in Moses Isegawa's Abyssinian Chronicles

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Abstract-Colonialism and its legacy continue to inspire a lot of debate among literary critics and theorists. Moses Isegawa's novel, *Abyssinian Chronicles*, weaves interconnecting personal narratives which help illuminate the larger national stories of the postcolony nation-state, Uganda. The novel, through gendered narrativization, tells stories that represent Uganda's socio-economic, cultural and political postcolonial state. Through close reading and critical analysis, this paper focuses on (re)construction of the postcolony by relying on the memory of the gendered subjectivities in the story. The chapter directs us to narratological, post-colonial and feminist literary critiques in which the narrative demonstrates its repudiations of stereotypes and reconfigurations of gender identities as part of an agent undertaking to recover the distinctive tradition of both the African man and woman.

Key words- Postcolony; Narrativization; Memory; Gendered Subjectivities

1. INTRODUCTION

Abyssinian Chronicles (2000) traces the lives of a post-independent Ugandan family from the sixties to the eighties. The novel is structured into seven mini-books that are weaved around the experiences of the protagonist, Mugezi, who is also the narrator. The other section is the history of his country, Uganda. The matrix narrative about the life of the narrator soon incorporates hypo-narratives that detail a family's history and that of the nation. The horrifying descriptions of the absurdities and senseless violence that take place during Idi Amin's regime and his subsequent dethronement are the hallmark of the narratives. Intertwined in these stories are other narratives on the devastating nature of HIV/AIDS in Uganda in the mid and late 1980s. The scourge takes a heavy toll on the lives of the protagonist's family.

In the novel, the narrator chronicles through memory, the pain and tragedies that bestalk his extended family, on the one hand, and the post-independent Ugandan nation, on the other. The narratives are a product of the narrator's recollection of experiences of the violence at both the personal and public levels during the post-independence decades. The stories represent themes of social violence and post-colonial issues of national independence. There are serious reflections on the relationship of violence to history and memory and how these in turn function to dismantle as well as reinforce neo-colonial power relations. The post-independent African's literature representations of past violence are a means of navigating the complex political and cultural processes of colonial excesses and reflections. *Abyssinian Chronicles* documents the troubled decolonisation process in post-independence Uganda. This paper examines how stories, based on the historical (re)collection of memory by the

protagonist in the novel, illuminate, specifically, on the Uganda postcolony and on African postcolonies, generally. Within this context, Isegawa reconstructs the authentic image of the African woman and man by negotiating new sites in which he articulates more viable and acceptable self-images.

2. (RE)IMAGINING UGANDA POSTCOLONY

Through the recollection of memory, harrowing stories of colonialism and World War II are weaved. Colonialism breeds racism and class and discrimination against the black race. It further divides the black people and oppresses them through forced taxation and forced participation in the war abroad. The narrator pieces all these stories together by a recollection of what Grandpa tells him. Power relations during the times of war and colonialism focus on colonisers who are portrayed as superior to the Africans. Ngugi (2009)[19] argues that to effectively colonise Africa, the colonialists rebrand them by giving them new names and divide them by appointing some of them as chiefs. The chiefs, with time, exercise the colonisers' powers. This background is responsible for the postcolonial upheaval in former colonies as colonial institutions of government are retained. Diop (2012)[11] argues that Africa finds herself in a sociological and economic situation not of her own "historical making" (224).

Abyssinian Chronicles is a creative literary reaction to the indefinable nature of gender and national identity and the (in) accessibility of history. In a notably deliberate effort to reveal the eventual subtlety of these, Isegawa negotiates the "abyss" through history, symbolism, culture and other literary techniques. The hybridity and diversity of his

fiction, in addition to his use of myth and metaphor, ensure that he does not lose grip on history or the complex human subject. He does not restrict himself to a narrative that navigates just a monological vision in history or culture. Instead, he creates an expanded, discursive, flexible and dialogical space, a coherent or 'carnival space' (Bakhtin 1988, p.130-131)[4]. In so doing, Isegawa weaves borders and (re)negotiates social constructions of history and identity.

The metaphor of the 'abyss' is persistent in Abyssinian largely because the artist appears to weave in his novel the family and nation as intolerant, antagonistic and repressive socio-political constructs. In each distinct context—from the family level to the socio-political terrain—the abyss hints at a subjugation to power, the inescapable socio-political circumstances that restrict the individual subject's sense of autonomy and freedom. At some point, the protagonist ponders over this autocratic establishment as signified by his seminary priest, Fr. Mindi, and observes that "this was a man (Fr. Mindi) programmed to obey and to be obeyed" (Isegawa 2000, p.200) thus hinting at the mechanical rather than the humane approach to human issues such as religion and politics. The oppressors themselves are subject to power and have limited abilities to go beyond or overcome dictatorial excesses that overwhelm this socio-political terrain:

It was during the depth of his suffering that Serenity came up with the only political statement he ever made. He said that Uganda was a land of false bottoms where under every abyss there was another one waiting to ensnare people, and that the historians had made a mistake: Abyssinian was not the ancient land of Ethiopia, but modern Uganda (Isegawa 2000, p. 440)[16].

The novel presents parallels between the public and the private when it portrays Padlock's despotism at the family level to parallel and echo that of Idi Amin's at the national level. The narrator's multiple sexual escapades signify Amin's military treachery and strategy. The deaths of Padlock and Serenity are briefly derisively dismissed by the narrator as the "demise of the despots" (p.439), which suggests that his parents' standing encapsulates in miniature the larger tyranny of Idi Amin at the national level, which also meets its "demise" in 1979. The novel highlights the subtle ubiquity of gendered relations of power and the (im) possibility of escaping these.

Abyssinian recaptures the animation of negotiating the existing power relations in both the private and public socio-political milieu to demolish a re-presentation of the unilateral relationship for a joint, liberal and inclusive one between the oppressor and the oppressed. The author appears to root for a renegotiation of the traditional binary of master/servant or ruler/ruled in which the authorial figure has absolute power over his/her victim. Isegawa demystifies this selfish view which resists any balanced modification of mastery between these two binary oppositional forces. Instead the fixity of this order and engagement is interrogated and the option of a

redistribution of power in terms of gender and at the level of family/state explored.

Isegawa draws on Amin's coup d'etat as a salient metaphor for narrator's "coups" against autocratic order in his personal life and, in this way, illuminates the harmonisation between macrocosm (state) and microcosm (family). The eerie similarity of repression—in spite of the various masks under which they replicate themselves—is conspicuously highlighted and is, in many ways, the recurring motif of Isegawa's creative production. While a student at the seminary, for instance, the narrator encounters the power excesses of Fr. Mindi, who doubles as the seminary bursar and a disciplinary master. Specifically, Fr. Mindi is accused of ensuring that the boys are fed on unpalatable posho and weevilled beans (p.199). The boys think that Fr. Mindi's unwelcome decision is due to his rather hypocritical, ironic and (mis)guided philosophy that such bad food makes good seminarians and ultimately good priests (p.200). Yet, it is not lost on the students that the priest and his colleagues eat niceties and sumptuous meals. The narrator reflects on how he views the priest: "I was in familiar territory hardly able to believe how similar dictatorial patterns were" (p.203). Mugezi, the narrator, is apparently referring to his parents' and the Government's repressive approach to their management of family and state affairs respectively.

It is apparent that this religious institution—as represented by Fr. Mindi—has become an accomplice in the repression of its people instead of seeking the desired comfort for the afflicted. Incensed by Fr. Mindi's philosophy, and in his usual proclivity to revenge as a statement of his protest, the narrator stealthily coats the inside of Fr. Mindi's car with excrement at night when everybody else is assumed to be asleep. Fr. Mindi's threat that "something was going to happen" (p.203) to the culprit should he not volunteer a confession is seen by Mugezi as yet another autocratic manifestation of any challenge to absolute power. This type of power is what the narrator seeks to renegotiate and reconfigure and redistribute to the marginalised.

The narrator occupies an "interstitial space" in which "the borders between home and world become confused" (Bhabha 1994, p.9)[7]. This space breaks the rules of the limits of the discursive systems that he simultaneously inhabits. The narrator's restlessness, which is his spontaneous response to his being "invaded by a series of bad dreams" (p.102) and which he believes have been cast upon him by his mother, Padlock, as retribution, constructs him as a transitional—or to use Bhabha's (1994)[7] term, liminal figure who exists in the world but peripherally thereby subverting any confinement that he may be required to adopt. The narrator's marginality represents the rest of the society's liminality at the national level. His restlessness is also his community's restlessness in the face of marginalisation as it presents itself in various phases. On an entirely physiological basis, the narrator considers his dream as a conscious leap toward forming an oppositional contrast to the temporal and ontological conditions of the majority of people:

It felt wonderful to be able to lie awake at night and imagine the world in slumber. It gave you the feeling that you were living in a different time zone, in a different universe, in a place where people woke as you slipped your school uniform (Isegawa 2000, p.103)[16].

Bhabha(1994)[7] articulates the notion of liminality recognisably in his seminal essays published in *The Location of Culture*. The “unhomely moment” (p.11) is summed up as that which relates the distressing undecidedness of an individual’s extra-sensory history to the wider disconnection of political reality (p.11). He refers to this articulation of the extrasensory together with the social as an interstitial intimacy (p.13). This relationship between the mental and the political situation that disrupts a clear-cut (dis)connection between the dominant and the subject as espoused in the narrator’s dream is evident in *Abyssinian*. The author’s duo-depiction of the narrator’s personal narrative and the political script of Uganda signifies the “in between temporality” of the private and historical documentation.

Bhabha (1994)[7] argues that a boundary is at once both within and outside, the “insider’s outsideness” (p.14) which is a contradiction. The contradictory depiction of the narrator, as an “insider outside,” refers to his marginality—he is positioned at the boundary of the domination and hierarchical order—and is constantly challenging it to its limits while at the same time being submerged in society and implicated in its ideological thinking. The narrator is, therefore, both inside and outside, and in this case he subverts the dichotomy of the personal and the political. Indeed, the personal signifies the political in the novel.

In view of the foregoing, it is apparent that *Abyssinian* engages a “boundary,” to use Bhabha’s term once again and thereby pushes at the limits of this cultural-political discourse. The novel exhibits an illustration which “performs” the theory that none of the meanings deciphered in a text is singular or permanent as all are instead open to various contestations and reinterpretation. For instance, the narrator vividly describes events and circumstances where he is present and, hence, has access to other characters’ innermost thoughts, emotions and subjective thoughts. For example, he provides an eye-witness’ account of the deaths of his parents, Padlock and Serenity, despite their bodies not being found, hence making the causes merely speculations.

One recurring strategy, which Isegawa exploits to advance his narrative on the subject of the margin, is through the recurring metaphor of death. The novel begins on a foreboding of death and ends with a pictorial illustration of Serenity’s death when he is presented as having been trapped in the “jaws of a crocodile” and within the grip of the “abyss.” Serenity’s death becomes significant if its psychological and metonymical representations are taken into account. His death can signify the writing process itself in which case, through death the writer transgresses the boundaries of semiotics and inaugurates the (re)constitution of identity. Kristeva (1974) delineates this

process of the dissolution of self. She argues that while colloquial language is subject to the death drive, literature strives to transcend the limitations of death:

Art takes on murder and...It assumes murder in so far as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes ‘art’... it is as if death becomes interiorised by the subject of such a practice; in order to function, he must make himself the bearer of death In returning, through the event of death, towards that which produces its break, in exporting semiotic motility across the border on which the symbolic is established, the artist sketches out a kind of second birth (Kristeva, 1974, p.70)

Accordingly, the artist, as “bearer of death,” succeeds in subverting his culturally predetermined identity through the literary licence which manipulates linguistic and social codes and norms. The subversive act of writing, complete with its manifold possibilities presented in and by the text, helps to facilitate the achievement of alternative selves. Isegawa actualises this theory in the *Abyssinian*—identity and its elusive fragmented composition:

Serenity was shocked to discover that character was not a monolithic rock which stopped moving somewhere in one’s late twenties, anchored by a wife and children, policed by friends, relatives, colleagues, extended family and strangers. He found himself in flux (Isegawa 2000 p.124)[16]

Abyssinian subverts history and its truth claims by pulling down the binaric oppositions, effectively displaying a lack of allegiance to any master-narrative. The writer exposes the rot in Amin’s military state and unravels the insidious engagement between politics and religion which he concludes are like hand-in-glove (p.290) to depict their inseparability. The novel underscores an awareness of the parallelism between the personal and the state; it reveals the pervasive nature of power relations and the individual’s space in them. The writer’s objective is to illustrate through fiction—among other possibilities—how unilinear cultural processes construct a repressive socio-political milieu. The variation between the psychological and the political is deconstructed with the writer appearing to suggest that the two mirror each other.

The novel exemplifies the position of the “unhomely” by continually and self-consciously redefining history and the subject, exhibiting an awareness of the cultural context of both. Although the *Abyssinian* seeks to depict the state of cultural politics in Uganda and although it interrogates the impact of colonialism, it is not summarily a political novel. It appears to trace the movement of the author’s own story but it is not, in the final analysis, an “autobiography”; instead, it embraces the abyss of the environment, culture, history, representation, identity and language in a way that refuses historical closure.

The Indians are said to have owned a huge fraction of the country’s business empire in the times running up to independence and even after independence. There has been

hope that Obote would nationalise their businesses but he had been slow. Amin's takeover is, therefore, celebrated. Amin can finally bring a brutal end to the Indians' spiralling business empire that locals believed to have marginalised and impoverished the native Ugandans. He is expected to seize the businesses and hand them to the natives. Amin's promise and this expectation renew the Uganda African people's hopes to take full control of their economy. Amin would then return to the barracks. This promise is greeted with jubilation and a sense of optimism. The pessimists, who represent the integration of formerly colonised countries as opposed to national and regional closure, are overshadowed as the people have waited for so long that they want to imbibe in Amin's promise in its purest form. The Indians begin to leave the country in large numbers as a result of Idi Amin's repressive orders. Some of them even commit suicide. It is said the British who aided Amin's coup are surprised at the turn of events. The hydra they had thrust to power has become larger than life: "No one seemed to know what he was capable of" (p.120).

The narrator's gender identity is also socially-constructed. His intolerant and oppressive parents, especially his mother, influence his character. He is portrayed as mischievous and naughty. At school, he devises survival tactics by writing love letters for bigger boys who initially bully him. He does so in exchange for favours such as money and gifts. But he plays mischief when the boys later want him to make a follow-up to the letters. He lies to them about the alleged responses given by the girls. He does this due to the hostile environment in which he grows up. His own parents are not spared the mischief.

Having been tormented and neglected by his mother and father for long, the narrator devises a trick to cause conflict between his parents. The use of a letter purportedly written by Loverboy to the narrator's mother, pledging illicit love, is a narrative strategy meant to serve several purposes. First, it enables the reader to understand the creative mind of the narrator and his able wit to counter his intolerant mother by creating a rift in her marriage with his father. Second, the letter is a narrative style that advances the plot of the novel by giving the plot variety. The English used in the letter is humorous and quite detached from the tone of the narrator:

Dear Miss Singer,

How are you smoking the cosmos in these highly atmospheric days? I am highly honored to dispatch this greatly wonderful missive to you. I supplicate you to recall the wonderful happiness we shared before this highly antagonizing cutout of love lodged itself in our cosmos and disorganized its blissful ministrations.

Permit me to conjecture that by throttling your highly volcanic love, you are disorganizing the workings of the cosmos. I hate to see you that way, you know. Your disestablishment of our love and its highly vertical thrust can only bring negative tintinnabulations in our hearts. I supplicate you to remember our song of songs...Miss Singer, you are the Queen of my heart, and I want you to

make me the President and the Commander-in-Chief of yours...

Mbaziira the Great (Isegawa 2000, p.140-41)[16].

Isegawa's vision for the place of a woman emerges when, despite the provocation that the letter presents to Serenity, enjoined with early reports and rumour that his wife is in love with a young man, Loverboy, the resolution is quite refreshing and promising: "Padlock is lucky that Serenity, abhors violence; otherwise she would have suffered a broken jaw. Serenity swallows his anger and concentrates his thought on Nakibuka" (p.147). The avoidance of violence as a means to resolve even the most sensitive and provoking issues such as alleged infidelity is, indeed, a refreshing strategy that constructs both male and female identities that have been relocated to the metropolis. The narrator's hint at a "broken" jaw most likely makes reference to the situations in rural areas where patriarchal codes are still enforced. But the mention of Nakibuka, Padlock's aunt, who sees her through her first day in her wedding bed, as Serenity's fallback plan is rather cowardly and defeatist on Serenity's part. He fails to engage with Padlock and resolve pressing issues. That way, the family can be a role model for the State which resolves its issues whenever it is aggrieved through violence and blood-bath. Dialogue as a means of resolving differences for mutual benefit appears elusive for both the family and the state.

The letter presents a unique articulative style. Bakhtin (1981)[4] contends that the novel is a "phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" in which the critic comes to terms with numerous features of style working on different linguistic levels but in a particular predictable order which is subject to stylistic controls. He posits that the novel breaks down into a number of primary stylistic constituents: direct authorial narration; artistic various forms of oral everyday narration; artistic forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration such as the letter and the diary; other forms of literary but para-artistic authorial speech such as moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions and memoranda; and the artistically individualised speech of characters. Indeed, all of these features, or a combination of them, is responsible for the individual distinctive voices which the various characters identify with. Fr. Kaanders' unique voice at the seminary; the love letter which is impersonated by the narrator to his mother; and watchman Dorobo's semiliterate "everyday speech" constitute an interesting rejoinder to Bakhtin's articulation. The voices are distinct and identifiable.

The diverse stylistic harmony, as articulated at the various levels of the self-narratives in the novel, combine to form an ordered artistic system, and are subjected to the more complex and elevated stylistic unity of the novel as a whole. The novel's unique style is evident in the amalgamation of these subordinated, yet still comparatively autonomous stylistic features that unite to finally constitute the whole work. Abyssinian style is found in the combination of numerous and intricate features of style. The linguistic and stylistic embodiment

of a given language element such as lexical, semantic, syntactic is shaped by that structured unity to which it is most immediately subordinated and participating in an engagement that realises the unified meaning of the whole. In other words, Abyssinian represents a diversity of social speech types and varied manifestations of individual characters' voices that are artistically ordered.

The narrator's struggle against his oppressive mother is also inspired by General Idi Amin, who had always advised his subjects to fight hard and come back each time they fell. The narrator is impressed by the idea of guerrilla warfare that Amin successfully repulses at one moment. The unpredictability of the warfare is what the narrator admires. Lwandeka, Padlock's younger sister, gets in trouble with the dreaded State Research Bureau and goes missing. This development forces Padlock to leave immediately. The narrator gets freedom to do what he wishes for the days his mother is away. He pursues a more humane approach to dealing with his young siblings. He engages them in dialogue and teaches them tolerance in the stark contrast to what his mother does. It emerges that Lwandeka's crime is corresponding with alleged German saboteurs bent on bringing down the government.

Padlock reminisces about her childhood as she is confronted with her younger sister's disappearance. She blames her parents for failing to discipline her sister at the right time. She says her sister had rebelled against her parents and had eloped with a crooked man who drank heavily and battered her. The narrator remembers how Padlock's childhood had been:

Padlock went over her childhood again...washing, cooking, digging. How her back had creaked as she did chores they refused to do. How thorns had pricked her skin as she went to the forest to collect firewood for the family. How her neck had ached as she carried pots of water on her head. How her parents has sided with the younger children, always blaming her for the mistakes others made (Isegawa 2000, p.157)[16].

This background that discriminates the girl-child by relegating her to a family's beast of burden is, to a great extent, responsible for the construction of Padlock's identity. This is the liminality that the author endeavours to confront and reconstruct within and outside gender. It is, however, ironical that instead of correcting her parent's mistakes, Padlock perpetuates them by oppressing her own children. The bitterness and frustration she undergoes as child is what the narrator goes through under her watch. The difference is that whereas Padlock does not stand up against her parents to object to the oppression, her son, the narrator becomes her match when he mischievously protests against his mother's oppression. Isegawa seems to appeal for respect and protection of both genders—male or female—for a cohesive family and society to emerge.

Padlock is also constructed as a religious woman. Having been a nun, she knows how to make various prayers and hymns, invoking the names of designated saints to intervene. When the narrator steals the bobbin of her sewing machine and hides it and having tried all strategies

to find it in vain, she resorts to prayer. She reads the Old Testament every evening before night prayers: "She started by beseeching God to reveal the thief. When He refused she beseeched Him to use his tremendous power...to bring back the bobbin (p.168).

Padlock is a devoted Catholic who believes in the power of God to intervene in human affairs. The invocation of God is partly used to frighten her children to reveal the whereabouts of the bobbin. Her worldview is also constructed on the basis of her faith. She alludes to the Bible, quoting various Old Testament texts. But the narrator, as cunning and witty as he is, dismisses his mother's pontification as "obviously a mind game and I was cleverer than she" (168). Even when Padlock bombards her family with terrifying images of the plague, the narrator is not intimidated. She even invokes St. Jude Thaddeus, the saint said to be a crime-solver, detective, protector and rescuer of desperate souls. Still nothing happens. Her persistence in praying for 90 days portrays her as prayerful, intimidating, superstitious and determined. She even hopes that her son, the narrator, should join the seminary and later become a priest to please her parents. She reveals that her parents would love to have a grandson who is a priest.

Cane, a primary school classmate of the narrator's and a beneficiary of his notorious letter writing, gives the reader more insights into the identity construction of young men in this society. The narrator reveals that Cane is abandoned by his father, a soldier, at a tender age and is raised by his mother. The young Cane is portrayed as battle-hardened and informed on many adult issues including pornography. His classmates at primary school recognise him as their sex teacher. Through his stories and depiction of character, Cane portrays a society that has neglected its youths in matters of moral upbringing. The negligence is caused by the impact of colonialism in postcolonial African states as witnessed by coups and wars in Uganda. Cane is assertive and critical when he argues that it was not the British who messed up their country but the sycophantic African forebears, greedy chiefs and kings. Clearly, he has influenced the narrator in many ways. The mischief and determination to fight for his space as shown by the narrator is also shared by Cane. Cane is a strange character who beseeches his lady teachers to cane him instead of being given other forms of punishment. Once they cane him, he rises with a full erection to the embarrassment of the lady teachers. His classmates, including the narrator, cheer him on later outside the classroom or out of the teacher's earshot.

Cane models his younger classmates on obscenities. He takes them out to find dead casualties of the Amin regime in forests and long grass and shows them the human female anatomy. His barefaced courage, ruthlessness and character formation are largely influenced by the warring, negligent and disintegrating society. It is this background that makes the narrator, a boy, have sexual intercourse with a neighbour's wife, Lusanani. Again, by bringing Cane on board, Isegawa seems to argue that society has

neglected its youth and moral decadence sweeps across it; from children through to the adults. He appears to say that family and national institutions are complementary and when one collapses the other collapses too. When Padlock finds her son in a compromising situation with Lusanani, she hits him with a stick severally and later sends him to stay with his aunt, her sister—Lwandeka. This action is tantamount to passing the buck instead of engaging the boy in a more gainful dialogue.

3. CONCLUSION

In this novel, the narrator displays a considerable natural endowment of intelligence that is required to address the problems of Africa's postcolony. The novel parallels Mugezi's individual and family stories and Uganda's stories, underscoring their inter-dependent nature. In this regard, the narrator devotes much of the narrative to an almost sequential account of national politics with General Idi Amin's capture of power through a coup, and his eventual ouster by same means at the hands of deposed president Milton Obote. I argue that African problems and the question of its governing classes can best understood through (re)imagined narrativization of lived experiences in the postcolony. The immediate postcolonial period promised improved citizenry lives due to the material dazzle that the empire had exposed the Africans to. But soon, the postcolonial African bourgeoisie with their bare craving for material things, sang Africa in a bottomless abyss.

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