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Research Article

The Dialectics of Exile in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of The Revolution*

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

Exile constitutes a pivotal and recurrent motif in literature. Its atavistic depiction indicates that it had the capacity to provide solace, succour or security to individuals who were confronted with some existentialist conditions and challenges and were able to overcome the situation and have a new, positive experience altogether. In contemporary times, however, artistic depiction of exile, which is basically linked with migration among Third-World subjects, indicates that it is a debilitating experience characterised by rancour, anguish, and regrets. It is depicted in an avalanche of literary works as a precarious experience wrapped in ambivalences. This is the thrust of this study which examines the multifaceted variants of exile in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* with a view to broadening its conceptual framework, scope and dimension in contemporary literary discourse. The study is a qualitative one and adopts the interpretive design. The tropes deployed are the diaspora, nostalgia, identity negotiation, and return migration. Exile, the study finds, engenders and intensifies solitude and friendlessness – an exasperating condition that results in despair, depression or delusion on the part of the exile. As an enervating experience, exile is capable of killing an individual's vision, prospects and aspirations and impinges on the exile's yearning or wish for self-actualisation or fulfilment. Thus, rather than offering the much anticipated reprieve, exile engenders inferiority complex and intensifies frustration, retrogression, nostalgia, and all-round displacement. Contemporary migrant fictions project exile as one of the indices of gloom among postcolonial Third-World subjects in foreign lands.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Exile is not a new concept or phenomenon in human experience. It has enormous atavistic or primeval underpinnings. The Bible, apparently one of the earliest sources of English literature especially during the Medieval and Renaissance Periods, is inundated with copious exilic recreations and experiences. For example, Adam's insubordination epitomised by the eating of the forbidden fruit results in him and spouse being driven away from the Garden of Eden to an unstipulated or unknown destination. This expulsion from "home" to an uncertain destination may be said to have marked the beginning of man's wandering on the surface of the earth. This exilic wandering was, however, continued by their offspring typified by Cain who killed his brother, Abel, out of unbridled envy and anger, and like his parents, received a curse (which also had to do with banishment) from God (Genesis 3 and 4).

The literary art is not bereft of exilic recreations and experiences; it is replete with profuse inscriptions or representations that bother on exile. For example, upon killing, inadvertently though, a fellow Umuofian, Okonkwo, alongside his wives and children, is banished from the Clan (Umuofia) for seven good years. For all these years, Okonkwo remains an exile in Mbanta, his maternal community, where he is granted a familial asylum in tandem with the culture of the people. In Mbanta, Okonkwo lives peacefully, engages in economic activities, and prospers therefrom (*Things Fall Apart*). In another artistic recreation of exile or exilic experience, Oedipus, upon discovering, after many years, that he killed his father, Laius, at the crossroads, and later married his mother, Jocasta, blinds himself and gets banished from Thebes (Okpiliya & Akpan, 2021). This exile is a form of retribution and a way to purify the city from the pollution caused by his (Oedipus) abominable deeds (Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*). This scenario is almost exactly recreated in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, adapted from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Here, Odewale suffers Oedipus's fate by being banished from Kutuje after it is convincingly established that the man he killed at the place where the three footpaths meet and the woman he subsequently married were his biological father and mother, respectively. Thus, as far as artistic representation of exile is concerned, it is safe to observe that right from primordial times, exile had the capacity to provide a kind of lifeline or solace for those who were confronted with some existentialist situations or challenges, and not an absolute death sentence (Akpan & Udoette, 2023).

In contemporary times, however, artistic depiction of exile narratives tends to paint a seemingly opposite picture of the experience. Rather than serving as a rescue or liberation option for those who find themselves in an existentialist condition, exile is depicted as a precarious experience wrapped in ambivalences. It is a disenchanting and debilitating experience characterised by uncertainties, rancour, angst, anguish, guilt, and regrets. An avalanche of literary works which projects the motifs of migration, the diaspora, exile, and displacement confirm this. In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, for example, Okey Ndibe recreates Ikechukwu Osundu's exilic experiences in the United States of America where he is a victim of prejudice, racism, bigotry, and chauvinism. He is depicted as the vulnerable 'Other' whose exilic disposition places him at the mercy of smart citizens who are always ready to cash in on his impuissance, innocence, and credulity to pull a fast one on him as he suffers all forms of displacement – ontological, structural, and psychological (Ndibe, 2014).

In the same vein, Brian Chikwava's representation of exile in his *Harare North* indicates that as an experience, exile is characterised by melancholy, uncertainty, fear, and unpredictability, even as it engenders a feeling of angst and un-fulfilment (Asukwo, 2023). In Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*, exile is inscribed, in line with Paul Zeleza's conceptualisation of the subject matter, as a multifaceted experience which involves every aspect or facet of displacement – physical, spatial, ontological and temporal, and entails alienation from homeland, family, language, "the continuities of self, a life continually yearning for the love of parents, for the comfort of belonging, and an existence battered by the dislocations of endless departures, arrivals, returns, travels" (Asukwo, 2021). Here, exile is inscribed as an experience in rancour, bitterness, and regrets. Similarly, Ayad Akhtar's depiction of exile in his *American Dervish* marks it as a debilitating experience characterised by isolation, deprivation, depression as well as emotional and psychological torture (Asukwo, 2022). The present study is a consolidation on the existing body of writings and inscriptions of exile to further broaden its scope and advance the frontiers and dimensions of its representation given the enormity of attention given it by contemporary writers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A literary text is like a finished product by a manufacturer. The manufacturer takes credit for the idea, funds, skill, and indeed all that has been put together for the production of the item. Though the product can advertise itself to an extent through its physical texture and other aesthetic features, it remains largely the responsibility of advertisers and consumers to market the product and give it a wider publicity than its physical branding would have done. This is the same with a literary text - the intellectual property is that of the author, but the publicity of the work lies with the reader and/or the critic. In literature, critics are the marketers of literary products. They are to a literary text what advertisers are to economic products. They undertake the task of interpreting or critiquing a work of art. Like the lamp, criticism dispels the darkness or the opaqueness that may characterise a literary text even as it is also capable of offering "radical interpretations of cultures and culture materials formerly rendered oblique, exorcised and left in the shadow" (Raji-Oyelade & Okunoye, 2008). A typical work of art has various strands of meaning; it is only through criticism that these multifarious layers of meaning can be uncovered for proper understanding and appreciation. This is the preoccupation of this subsection of the study which appraises some of the hermeneutic positions and perspectives of critics in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution.*

Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* was published in 2007 in Britain. Though it so far enjoys relatively limited critical reactions, the novel is a warm and illuminating tale of Ethiopian immigrant experiences, frustrations and hopes in the United States of America. The protagonist, Sepha Stepahnos, migrated

from Ethiopia as a teenager, fleeing from the Red Terror, a militia group that claimed the life of his father. Doing a features review for *The Guardian*, Olivia Laing notes that Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* is a tale of ambivalent experiences of Sepha, whose deracinating status results in him and two other African migrants who are his close friends not living a fulfilled life in a society they had overly fantasised about. Laing notes that at first, the trio of Sepha, Kenneth, and Joe were under the spell of the American dream, "guilty of hyper inflated optimism and irrational hope" only for the dreams to be eroded as none of them "is at home in the new world". This unfulfilled desire, Laing observes, is expressed in the kind of jobs that are available for them in the United States as against their dreams of staggering and stupendously paying jobs.

In "Recommended Reads: *Children of the Revolution*", Jen Tomkins notes that the novel presents a vision of America that "our eyes are not frequently opened to", a society that subtly fans the flames of displacement and alienation "for those that are searching for a home in a country that promises so much…" (Tomkins, 2007). Tomkins is of the view that the protagonist of the work, Sepha Stephanos, is neither successful nor content as a result of the alienating nature of the host society. Rather than being fulfilled, the critic posits that Stephanos is a lonely, depressed and isolated character "that is fearful of his future and unwilling to go back to his past, a man who wants to carve his way into American life but is just unable to do so" (Tomkins, 2007).

In "Nuances of Migration: Immigration, Emigration, and Individualism in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*", Simeon Gatev places the novel in the class of those narratives that focus interest on issues regarding "immigrant's quest of integration into an already highly domesticated American society", positing that novels of this genre generally pay attention to issues of "otherness", dislocation, and integration (Gatev, n.d). In addition, Gatev notes that not only is the novel "a bildungsroman of acculturation", but it is also "a bildungsroman of extirpation", implying that though the African migrants in the text try their best to get acculturated into the American society, they gradually come to the realisation that they do not belong there. They may have physically migrated to America for some obvious reasons but emotionally and psychologically, they are in their home country. This ambivalent attitude is probably the major reason why they can hardly settle down for a meaningful life in their host nation. Gatev also views Mengestu's art as an anachronistic one which merges "different temporal slices into a single dimension" (Gatev, n.d.).

Analyzing the text from a sociological angle, Kristine Via identifies racism and class stratification as the basis for the alienating disposition of Sepha Stephanos and other characters (African migrants) in the work. Via also reads the work from the perspective of the author's biography, stating that Dinaw Mengestu projected a lot of his real life story into the narrative having "fled to the USA in the midst of African sieges…" (Via, n.d). It is, however, expedient to note that of all that has been reviewed, none of the works centres on the motif or dialectics of exile in the text, which is the preoccupation of this research.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was designed to examine the dialectics of exile in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*. It is a qualitative research which involves analyses of texts. Data for the research are gleaned from two sources – primary and secondary. The primary source of data for the study is Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* while secondary sources include textbooks, journal articles, published and unpublished dissertations and theses as well as internet sources. The primary text – *Children of the Revolution* – is purposively selected because of its multifarious representations of exile.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* (henceforth, COTR) uses one stone to kill two birds. While it is first and foremost a migration/exile narrative, the work also dwells on fundamental issues of leadership deficit or general disillusionment which form the basis for the massive migration of citizens from the three countries of Africa captured in the narrative – Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Con go, and Kenya – to the United States of America. At the risk of sounding repetitive, migration, especially among Third-World subjects, is, to a large extent, the result of acute failure in leadership in the migrants' homeland predicated on the need by the migrants to eke out a living at a new home, somewhere far away from the traditional or native homeland. Of course, no one would want to live in an environment that is prone to violence, unrests, uprisings, upheavals, insurrections, banditry, militancy, terrorism, wars, and the like, neither would anyone be comfortable to continue to reside in an area that is constantly threatened by natural calamities such as floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, storms, volcanic eruptions, and other geologic processes. But among Third-World people, the most established basis for migration centres around leadership failure as citizens negotiate new spaces elsewhere to enable them to escape from man-made disasters and find peace, happiness, jobs or other means of livelihood. Mengestu's COTR features three young African migrants namely, Stephanos, Joseph, and Kenneth – all victims of leadership abuse in their respective nations, and who find the United States of America their new home. Let us begin with Stephanos, the Ethiopian.

Mengestu's novel is set in the 1970s during the reign of Mengistu Haile as head of state. The narrative recounts the horror Ethiopians passed through in the hands of the emperor-autocrat which became the basis for many Ethiopians, especially members of the middle class to leave the country for other safer climes. In Ethiopia, particularly during the period the narrative is set, an emperor was synonymous with a demi-god, an embodiment of unbridled power, intimidating and fear-inspiring. On grounds of mere suspicion, an emperor could kill as many citizens as possible without batting an eyelid (Clarke, 2010). This is what transpires in the Ethiopia of the primary text under study which results in series of revolutions and ultimately, massive emigration of citizens to far away countries including the United States of America for safety. Stephanos is an indirect victim of the brutality of Mengistu's regime. The emperor's absolutionist disposition results in the use of soldiers to eliminate perceived enemies of the state, including Stephanos's father. It is with trepidation that Stephanos witnesses the torment his father undergoes in the hands of young soldiers

who claim to be protecting the interest of the emperor. Thus, while many take to physical and literal revolution as a way of protesting against the status quo, Stephanos and a few other Ethiopians who flee to the United States stage their own protest and/or revolution through migration. Migration can therefore be viewed as a non-violent revolutionary response to an unjust, hopeless, oppressive, blood-sucking and inhuman system.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where Joseph migrated from over a decade earlier is not totally different from Stephanos's Ethiopia in terms of autocratic and brutal leadership. The work is set during the period Mobutu Sese Seko held sway as the head of government of the country which was then known as Zaire. Unlike Laurent Kabila whom Joseph describes as an exemplary leader, Mobutu is a classic example of a typical Third-World leader – cruel, despicable, corrupt, brutal, and inept. With this kind of leadership, according to Joseph, a nation retrogresses steadily into oblivion. Rather than evolve a system that carters for the welfare of citizens, Mobutu's stock-in-trade is warfare in which even children are conscripted to help him fight fellow citizens who seem to oppose his becalmed, rudderless, despotic, and brutal leadership. Young people who finish school have nothing to engage themselves positively; all they do is to play chess from dawn to dusk. Before migrating to the United States, Joseph was in this class of idle, jobless, and future-bereft young men. He recalls: "We had no jobs, we were done with school, no family, no money, so we played all day".

Amidst huge unemployment level, what Mobutu's government deems fit for young school leavers is to throw them into the bushes and forests to fight his perceived enemies. There are a thousand other young persons who have no basic education; they are stag illiterates. Mobutu aptly cashes in on the illiteracy and vulnerability of this group of young Congolese, arms them with weapons and sends them into the bushes and forests to fight and protect the person and office of the head of state. Mobutu's is a government that pays attention to the welfare of a few privileged individuals in the corridors of power while a majority of the citizens are left to wallow in poverty, pains, and sorrow. Incidentally, it is the children of the poor and neglected members of the society who get conscripted into these absurd strives. Like Stephanos aforementioned, Joseph also views migration as a cogent mode of revolting against a hopeless system, hence, his decision to leave for the United States of America.

Though Kenya, Kenneth's home country, does not appear brutal, narcissistic, and hopeless as the two countries mentioned above, Kenneth does not see it as a place that offers opportunities for citizens' advancement the way America, where he finds himself, does. He can hardly conceal his gratitude to his host country as far as effort at citizen's advancement is concerned, as he heartily exclaims: "God bless America…Only here can someone become the Budha". For him, society can only thrive meaningfully when government pays attention, not just to the welfare of citizens, but also to their dreams, aspirations, and prospects. Kenneth is an intelligent young man, but would not find opportunity to realise his potentials in Kenya until he migrates to America where he combines menial jobs with education until he finally graduates as an engineer. Of the trio of Stephanos, Joseph, and Kenneth, the only one whose plans to go back to the native homeland (return migration) appears a bit realisable is Kenneth. This is so because having studied and qualified as an engineer, his status as an exile in a foreign land would not help him to fully realise the rest of his dreams, namely, having a job and advancing his frontiers limitlessly even as he soon realises that "to lie outside one's legitimate culture is to be homeless, irrational, anarchistic, beyond representation" (McCarthy, 2008).

In "The Dialectics of Identity", Marcus Bullock notes that at some points in one's life, the need to escape from one place and strike out for another becomes the last resort of some individuals given the "inescapable immediacy" of situations or conditions that may present themselves (223). The implication is that migrants' decision to leave their ancestral homeland to a foreign one is most times deliberate because there appears to be no better choice or option available at the point in time. This is the situation with Stephanos, Joseph, and Kenneth, who migrate to the United States apparently because of the unsafe condition of their traditional homelands. Stephanos, for example, is an Ethiopian. The horrible things he witnessed while growing up as a teenager in Ethiopia is the sole reason why he had to leave the country at the age of sixteen. The level of man's inhumanity to man occasioned by brutal murdering of people on a daily basis, including his own father, would not let him feel safe or comfortable enough to continue to live there. He would rather choose a place he can call a home, albeit, an improvised one, than a blood-sucking native home. The torture his own father underwent in the hands of the Red Terror, a militia group of the emperor, would forever remain indelible in his memory. After witnessing the bestial treatment on the father, which treatment resulted in the man's death, Stephanos had no option but to run to America for safety. He recalls some of the frightening episodes on the night of his father's death in the hands of blood-thirsty soldiers of the emperor:

…As soon as he spits, one of the soldiers steps to the front and, with the butt of his rifle, knocks my father across the head…The two soldiers take turns kicking my father in the head and ribs. When my mother begins to cry out, the lead soldier draws his pistol and orders her to stop. So she does so immediately.

The scenario highlighted above can indeed be very horrible for a sixteen year old. Stephanos is helpless. There is absolutely nothing he can do than to pray silently in his heart for a divine intervention at that point; for the miraculous death of the torturers of his father, and if possible, for an end to all things. Since a majority of emigrants from Ethiopia move to the US than any other part of the world, Stephanos, through the help of Berhane, his maternal uncle, also leaves for the States. However, in spite of finding himself in an apparently civilised society, the realities of exile still dawn on him - deprivation, rootlessness, ambivalence, inferiority complex, nostalgia, and un-fulfilment.

As a debilitating experience, exile is capable of killing an individual's vision, prospects and aspirations. As a condition, exile tends to impinge on the exile's yearning or wish for self-actualisation or fulfilment. In fact, it is a dream-killing experience. When the trio of Stephanos, Kenneth, and Joseph met one another as valets at the Capitol hotel in Washington, their mission was to spend a few years in the menial jobs and

thereafter apply for admission to study in the university. Joseph had hoped to seek admission to the Michigan University and study up to the doctoral level. He had visualised or envisioned the life of a great poet and writer. But now, he has spent nineteen good years in the United States, and in all these years "he had worked as a busboy, and then as a bellhop, and now as a waiter". The dream to go to school and study up to the doctoral level is now stillborn, a mirage, and, as the narrator would put it "the idle dreams of a restless young immigrant". He cannot consolidate on his ambition in life because of the sheer lack of the enabling environment to do so. To resign from the menial job and pursue a full-time study in a society where he has absolutely no support from anywhere appears a joke taken too far. This is particularly so because, even as a menial jobber, he still has a lot of bills to pay apart from the fact that the pittance from the job is also taxed. Thus, year after year, Joseph keeps heaping a false, unrealisable hope of becoming a great man in the future on himself.

Interestingly, however, Joseph had memorised some lines of a poem written by an anonymous Togolese poet, which lines should ordinarily encourage or step up his morale to work hard and break some life's limitations particularly the ones imposed on him by his status as an exile, but this would only end up a mere mental exercise as the vicissitudes of exile would undermine all that and place him in a stationary social position. A few lines of the poem read as follows:

We have come this far, to find we have even further to go the last traces of a permanent twilight have faded and given way To what we hope is nothing short of a permanent dawn.

Joseph's love for these lines appears superficial, though consoling. The real message of the poem is predicated on the need for one to summon courage and start all over again at any point in one's life. But for Joseph, these lines are mere routine recitations with absolutely no anchor as his life remains unchanged with no categorical index of self-development after nearly two decades in the US. Thus, rather than engender fulfilment, exile remains a pernicious experience which undermines one's vision or prospect.

Stephanos, the narrator/protagonist of the novel, is another character who has spent a good number of years in the United States as an exile without any tangible achievement. His is a life of little or no ambition amidst an air of complacency. Unlike Joseph, Stephanos has an uncle (Berhane) who is also an exile in the States. Berhane is always on hand to give him all the support he desires to realise his potentials in life. It is this maternal uncle of his who facilitates his admission to study engineering in an unnamed University in the States. But for reasons that may not be unconnected with his status as an exile, Stephanos, within a period of two years, drops out of the school, packs his belonging from his uncle's house and moves to the Logan Circle, a suburb of the District Council occupied mainly by the black population, the hoi polloi, and of course, the dregs of the American society. Here, he opens a small grocery store not far from his rented apartment, but his attitude towards the business is lukewarm and unenthusiastic. It appears the Logan Circle setting has further exacerbated his unperturbed orientation about life. His confession about life vis-à-vis his ambition smacks of disenchantment which may be traced to the unfortunate socio-political situation in his homeland, and of course, his status as an exile in US. He confesses his complacent, apathetic and unenthusiastic attitude towards life thus:

Here in Logan Circle, though, I didn't have to be anything greater than what I already was. I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mine to begin with. As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came running and screaming with the ghost of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days…

From this confession, it could be deduced that Stephanos has thrown in the towel for an unambitious life. He has killed every delectation or zest peculiar to a young man of his age as far as the pursuit of progressive life is concerned. This complacent attitude finds expression in the way and manner he runs the grocery store. He opens and closes the store at will. He has no intention of expanding it, and at some points takes no notice of items that are either available or out of stock. This nonchalant attitude results in him being utterly frustrated when he is served quit notice as a result of his inability to pay the shop's rent thereby having absolutely nothing to fall back on.

Another trait of an exile easily identifiable in the character of Stephanos is inferiority complex. This finds expression in the way he appears 'small' and worshipful in the presence of white people. As stated earlier, Stephanos lives in the Logan Circle, a neglected suburb not far away from the District Council. The area is mainly occupied by black people and the dregs of the American society. Stephanos is highly surprised and stunningly excited to find that the person who comes to rent the building next to his apartment is a white person. For him, it is unbelievable that a white person or family could come to live next door to him. This is especially so because before Judith moved in there, Stephanos hardly saw white people come to the neighbourhood, and so he had simply concluded that the area was exclusively meant for black and excruciatingly poor and common people, and never the privileged white. When sharing the news with the duo of Kenneth and Joseph, his response to one of their questions is indeed baffling, thought provoking and ultimately saddening: "I don't think they know I live here". This is perhaps, the reason why he frantically adores Judith, the white woman next door, and her daughter, Naomi.

It is, perhaps, this admission of inferiority that blinds his eyes to the various love advances Judith makes towards him. For him, Judith is too educated and rich, but this is the same lady whose love advances towards him are not only glaring but also recurrent. When Judith invites him to her house for the first time for dinner, the excitement in Stephanos finds expression in how early he closes the shop that day, and of course, the number of minutes he spends dressing up, checking, rechecking, and looking up himself in the mirror, and the general rehearsal that follows. His narration of the pre-visit preparation is indeed startling:

I went home early and changed into a neatly pressed button-down white shirt and a pair of slightly worn gray wool slacks Kenneth had handed to me…Before leaving the house I stood

in front of my bathroom mirror and practised my introduction. I brushed forward the edges of my thinning hair and patted down the sides of my small Afro…I stepped back from the mirror and practised my introduction. I wanted to be ready for the moment Judith opened the door and found me standing on her steps.

Judith is in love with Stephanos, but his inferior, slavish and worshipful disposition would not let him notice. On the first day of his visit to Judith, the latter starts showing signs of infatuation or some love advances towards him, a move he would never notice because of his over-estimation of white people. Stephanos sees white people as superior creatures, not mere beings. The narrator (Stephanos himself) recounts what transpires on the first day of the visit: "We kissed each other on both cheeks. Judith's hand lingered for what I thought was a second beyond polite on my back". In another of a similar visit, Judith explicitly displays emotional affection towards Stephanos, expecting him to cash in on the opportunity and push the game further, but self-admitted inferiority would not let him take the bull by the horns.

Inferiority complex is noticed in virtually everything about Stephanos including his own tastes and preferences. In another of his visit to Judith's house, Stephanos admires the boxes sent to Naomi by the absentee father, who is also the estranged husband of Judith. In a conversation with Judith, the latter, who actually admires those boxes but would prefer "the simple and elegant" types marvels at Stephanos's choice of the "small and cheap" ones. Judith's sudden response is indeed an affirmation of her disappointment, disapproval and/or unwillingness to continue to nurture the path of a meaningful, and if possible, a lasting (romantic) relationship with Stephanos, as she retorts: "That's too bad. It looks like you've gone and picked the wrong family". In fact, Stephanos's confession of a part of his taste and preference has enabled Judith to conclude that there is indeed a wide gap between him and her, hence, her insistence on rethinking her feelings towards him. At several points in which Stephanos appraises himself vis-à-vis Judith's, he always finds himself small, deficient or inadequate compared to Judith's towering status. It would therefore be safe to describe exile as a precarious experience capable of reducing the worth of an individual, creating or enhancing a gap between human beings who are created equal and who are supposed to relate as such.

Nostalgic attachment to the ancestral homeland is one of the reasons for the distracted, bewildered and nonplussed disposition of exiles. This is perhaps the basis for Jan Crew's description of an exile as "a creature balanced between limbo and nothingness, exile abroad and homelessness at home". This *in-betweeness* creates, in the mind of an exile a perpetual feeling of nostalgia, which is one cogent strategy for overcoming the anxiety of separation from the native country, "allowing self-exploration and understanding of one's identity". For the trio of Stephanos, Kenneth, and Joseph, the memory of home is as strong and important as life itself even as they can hardly have a few minutes banter or gathering without reminiscing on the memory of home – the state of affairs, the role players or contributors to the sorry state of homeland, and, of course, the need for its redemption. In many instances of these conversations, Kenneth, who, most times considers the entire African continent as home, bemoans the kind of leaders that the home of the world's black population has been unlucky to have, attributing the backwardness of the continent to these selfish, inept, power drunk and blood-thirsty leaders.

For Edward Said, exile is "…a discontinuous state of being". This is, perhaps, the reason why exiles, irrespective of what may have constituted their social status in their homeland get diminished once they find themselves in a foreign land. Put differently, those who find themselves in a foreign land as exiles should be ready to drop their former status and come to grasps with the reality of the moment, for there is a sudden discontinuity in their 'state of being' in a way that captures only the current situation rather than the immediate or remote past. In Mengestu's novel, Stephanos's uncle, Berhane, is one of the prominent and influential men in Ethiopia. He is stupendously rich. But because rich and influential people are a threat to the emperor, he had to seek asylum in the US leaving his wife, children, landed and mobile property in Ethiopia. But in the host country, there is a reversal of fortune for Berhane. The only job available for him is cab driving, and at some other times he works as attendant.

Exile engenders or promotes filial and/or familial separation. It displaces, nurtures or breeds huge losses in the life of an exile, which losses include language, home or root as well as social bond (Rushdie, 280). Exile separates loved ones, families and friends from one another even as there seems to be little or no possibility of reuniting. Berhane had run away from Ethiopia leaving behind his aged mother, among others. After spending barely two years in asylum, his mother died. Since the tyrant emperor is still in power, he dare not travel home in the name of burying the mother. He rather chooses to remain in the States and mourn the woman in the midst of fellow Ethiopian exiles who come to commiserate with him. Among African people, the role of children towards the parents is incomplete until they bury them. It appears an unwritten rule or convention in many African societies that upon their death, a child gives the parents a befitting burial usually considered the last respect. Given the well-endowed status of Berhane especially back in the day in Ethiopia, giving the mother and indeed the parents a befitting burial would not be an issue to contemplate. It would have been done with utmost ease. But here he is in a foreign land an exile, separated from home by millions of miles. To ensure he does not put his life at risk by going to Ethiopia, he rather stays back in the United States and mourns the departed mother though his heart is with the family back home.

As an experience, encourages ludicrous pretense, which pretense aims at covering up the true state or condition of the exile. Put differently, exiles hardly tell the truth about their real condition to their own people back home. Rather, they sometimes paint a picture indicative of the smoothness of things or condition even when they find themselves at the nadir of life's experience. There is, thus, a tendentious attempt at calming the nerves of family members, friends and loved ones who may be concerned about their welfare in the foreign land. As a face-saving attitude, this approach, they believe, can serve as an effective therapy in reducing the anxiety, worries, and emotions of members of the family back home. Berhane is Stephanos's mother's brother. He brought Stephanos to America

and had him enroll in the university to study engineering, but Stephanos would not study beyond two years before dropping out. In many of his letters to the boy's mother, Berhane assures the woman that the son is doing well. However, Berhane is aware of Stephanos's unambitious, lukewarm, and nonchalant attitude towards virtually everything including the small business he claims to be managing, but would not disclose to the sister probably to avoid some dire consequences that might range from raised blood pressure to depression.

Exile intensifies solitude and friendlessness; it is an exasperating experience that may result in depression or delusion on the part of the exile. In a bid to avoid some of these untoward situations, exiles do devise means of escape from the vicissitudes of exile and resort to what may be termed adaptations for survival. One of these routes of escape from the travails of exile is sex. For them, sex is anaesthetic, anxiety-taming and nerves-calming even as it has the potentiality of freeing the mind of pent-up feelings that is capable of undermining one's health. This is Stephanos's regular resort whenever he feels like freeing himself of the frustration of exile and from life's woes generally. His neighbourhood, the Logan Circle, has a lot of commercial sex workers some of whom patronise his grocery store for a number of very common items including condoms. When some of these prostitutes cannot pay for what they buy in cash, they do so in kind. At times Stephannos would deliberately refuse to collect money for the items purchased only to have sex with them in its place.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera equates the condition of an exile with that of a tightrope high above the ground "without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood" (quoted in Ada Savin, 3). From Kundera's analogy, the condition of an exile is synonymous with that of a settler or sojourner who does not categorically belong anywhere, an indication of their isolation, marginalisation and exclusion from the scheme of things in their host land. The result is an unbearable experience of physical and psychological loneliness, unhappiness, as well as emotional torture. This precarious, dicey, or unstable identity and status breeds unease, discontent, and restlessness, hence, a contemplation of return to the homeland by the exile. This contemplation, as observed by Kundera, is consequent upon the realisation of the "quasi impossible task to resettle for good, of the difficulty to find the vantage point that will allow them to create anew".

At this point, the exile becomes engulfed in nostalgic feelings, an unmitigated longing for a reunification with the homeland, what Shaden Tageldin views as "a longing, not for the simple past, but for the past reconstituted and futurised, a past restored to an imaginary…pre-exilic integrity and relived, elsewhere" (Savin, 2013). But more often than not, the planned return to the homeland does not normally take place as longed for or envisaged. It is often times deferred if not written off altogether. Such nostalgia, by its very "temporal and spatial impossibility… wears its sufferer's body and story into scraps of absence" (Savin, 2013). Though nostalgic, Stephanos realises the sheer impossibility of returning to Ethiopia. Rather than continue to live in the illusion of return to homeland, Stephanos commits his sensory elements into trying to capture mentally the state of his homeland. He also satisfies his curiosity for the homeland by trying to compare objects found on the streets of America with similar sights in Ethiopia.

Svetlana Boym aptly distinguishes two cardinal ways of giving shape and meaning to nostalgic feelings, which she calls restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. For her, restorative nostalgia places emphasis on *"nostos* and proposes to build the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" while reflective nostalgia thrives, essentially, on what she terms *"algia*", which is the longing itself, and which, she believes, delays the homecoming "wistfully, ironically, desperately" (Savin, 2013). Boym further notes that while restorative nostalgia projects the absolute truth, reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. Going by this typology, it would be apt to deduce that exiles are preoccupied with restorative nostalgia only during the early days of their stay in the host land when the thoughts and plans to return to the homeland still remain fresh and somewhat implementable, but as time progresses, the reality of reflective nostalgia soon dawns on them. At this point, the longing for homeland suffers constant deferment even as exiles come to realise and as well appreciate the sheer impossibility of doing so. This is the situation with the trio of Stephanos, Joseph, and Kenneth, whose plans to return to their respective homelands suffer perpetual deferment. Generally, however, the feeling of nostalgia to the homeland or estrangement from same is necessarily a function of positive political changes or the lack of it in the homeland. Accordingly, as there are no positive or remarkable political changes in the homelands of Stephanos, Kenneth, and Joseph, their nostalgia remains reflective – eternally contemplated but constantly deferred.

5. CONCLUSION

Exile is one of the oldest realities of human experience. Artistic representation or depiction of exile indicates that from primordial times, exile had the capacity to provide solace for those who were confronted with some existentialist situations or challenges. In contemporary times, however, artistic depiction of exile narratives tends to paint a seemingly opposite picture of the experience. Rather than serving as a rescue or liberation option for those who find themselves in an existentialist condition, exile is depicted as a precarious experience wrapped in ambivalences. This is the thrust of this study which attempted a broadening of the scope and dimension of exile in Dinaw Mengetu's *Children of the Revolution*. Among the various depictions of exile in the study is the fact it intensifies solitude and friendlessness, and that it is an exasperating experience that may result in depression or delusion on the part of the exile. Moreover, exile is a debilitating experience capable of killing an individual's vision, prospects and aspirations. As a condition, exile tends to impinge on the exile's yearning or wish for self-actualisation or fulfilment. It is a dream-killing experience. The paper attributes these untoward experiences to the inept and failed leadership in the homelands of the exiles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In spite of the dogged resolve to abandon the traditional homeland for a new, foreign one, Third-World migrants soon

come to grasp with the ambivalences of exile occasioned by the fact of alienation, displacement, solitude, hardship, and nostalgia. Rather than being the much-anticipated utopia, the frustration, suffering, and misery inherent in exile appear more biting than the ones the migrants had run away from in their traditional homeland. So, rather than run to an anticipated or fantasised utopia, citizens of Third-World nations owe themselves a duty to stay back in their respective countries and, through deliberate and concerted efforts, ensure their nations work for them.

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