



## The Wretched of the Diaspora: Fragmentation and Diasporic Corporeality in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*

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### ABSTRACT

Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* is preoccupied with victim diasporic experience as a central theme and insists on the possibility of the triumph of human warmth in the face of adversity. Diasporic subjectivity is concerned with the formation of diasporic identities. Diasporas are both an effect and affect of power which is integrated within the process of subject formation. Power both acts on the subject and also enacts the subject into being. The paper examines Dinaw Mengestu's diasporic characters in *Children of the Revolution* who are confronting the realities of dislocation and its concomitant diasporic ambivalences characterized by the enchantment and disenchantment with the American Dream. The characters in the text are haunted by histories of political instability and memories of loss that condition their diasporic subjectivities. The novel's protagonist, Sepha Stephanos, epitomizes the dislocated figure who is negotiating and navigating his way through the realities of both physical and cultural dislocation. The Red Terror in Ethiopia, which claimed his father and forced Stephanos into exile, remains etched in his memory and functions as constitutive trauma. The characters' diasporic alienation is exacerbated by the individualistic American cultural space into which they were thrust and the realization that they cannot escape from it. The paper utilizes Daniel Punday's ideas of corporeal narratology to explore the interaction of the diasporic characters' bodies with the diasporic world they inhabit in order to enable a more insightful understanding of the consequences of dislocation. This paper is a modest contribution to Diaspora Studies which are becoming increasingly important in global politics.

**Keywords:** Bodies, corporeality, alienation, fragmentation, trauma, afropolitanism

### Introduction

Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* is a rich meditative novel and a moving exploration of the migrant condition. It depicts the loneliness and alienation that characterizes the life of dispersed people all over the world. It offers a glimpse into the specific experience of Sepha Stephanos, a member of the Ethiopian community in the United States. The text is fictional rendition of the diasporic condition and an indictment of

racism, itself a major preoccupation of contemporary African-American fiction. Other contemporary US based African writers who broach this issue are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Maaza Mengiste.

### Materials and Methods

Dinaw Mengestu, the author of *Children of the Revolution* is himself diasporic. He is a US based author of Ethiopian descent and a representative of contemporary immigrant American writer who uses his fiction to articulate the experience of the new African diaspora in America. *Children of the Revolution* presents the protagonist's haunting recollections of the Ethiopian Red Terror under the ruthless dictator, Mengestu Haile Miriam, which claimed his father's life and led to his own exile in America. The text recreates this traumatic historical event which remains a milestone for the Ethiopian diaspora in America. The novel began its life under the two titles: The American title *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* and the England publication, *The Children of the Revolution*.

### Results and Discussion

In this paper, and in the context of the novel under study, fragmentation is understood as disintegration, brokenness, alienation, existential ennui, emptiness and disenchantment. The novel incorporates fragmentation in its structure. Fragmentation permeates the entire novel and seems to act on the bodies of the diasporic characters and their bodies also seem to enact this fragmentation.

The actual bodies of diasporic characters in the novel are depicted in a manner that they articulate the character's fragmented existence. Sepha Stephanos, the novel's protagonist, is haunted by his own physique which is so central to his identity. He is 'Ethiopian thin', even his manager at the Colonial Civil Restaurant where he initially worked as a valet, said he didn't need a nickname to remind him that he was Ethiopian. He laments that he and his diasporic friends, Joe from Congo and Ken from Kenya, have suffered enough mockery and humiliation to last their lifetime. Such palpable humiliation acts on their bodies and shapes their outlook of life as African immigrants in America. This humiliation seems to be their inevitable lot once they were interpellated as diaspora, a condition Stephanos perpetually broods over since he did not come to America by choice but as a victim diaspora. He is thus unable to adjust to his new 'home', many are the moments that he maroons himself in his corner store, he exhibits a sense of worthlessness, he is not at ease with himself and with his new environment. He loves the quiet of his shop at Logan Circle, which he is busy running down because he didn't opt for occupation out of any passion for it but because he wanted somewhere 'he could read quietly and alone; for as much of the day as possible' (p. 40). He places reading above commercial transactions. Stephanos also withdraws to reticence and philosophical reflections about the reality of diaspora, he opts to lose himself into anonymity: He tells us:

"I was poor, black and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all the early ambitions of the immigrant..."...As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here, running and screaming with the ghosts of one old family attached on my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no harm" (p.41).

Here is a case of character whose traumatic past weighs heavily on his back, acts on his body until it rejects any meaningful existence. This explains his ambivalence towards America.

Diasporic bodies in the novel are depicted as mobile and wandering. Stephanos and his friends wander aimlessly in Washington DC in the evening, they have no particular joint of interest. They treat themselves to alcohol to ease their sense of isolation, and though their revelry is escapist and evanescent, they experience happy moments as they dance to T.Rex's song: "But you won't fool the children of the revolution. No you won't fool the children of the revolution...", a song from which the title of the novel derives. This can be read as a corporal subversion of the fragmentation thrust upon their lives by the fact of dislocation. Stephanos further exhibits this image of a wandering body by quitting residence at his Uncle's premises a little away from Washington DC for no apparent reason. It is noteworthy that even in his shop, he is unable to find space for his body; at one moment, he makes aimless rounds at Logan Circle, and will take his body back to his Uncle's place, not to pay him a visit but to rummage through his box for letters on the atrocities in Ethiopia, which only serve

to intensify the fragmentation already weighing heavily on his body. The love for his late father's cuff links bearing the old Ethiopian flag is also a physical reminder of trauma that does not belong to the past but one that is central to his identity, it is a past of the present. Though the cuff links he seems to treasure so much may have no material worth, they are extremely valuable in their psychological and emotional significance. His fragmented existence is further attested to by the fact that he has been unable to establish any stable love relationship in America, only having one night stands with different prostitutes. This quest for ephemeral pleasure can be read as a corporeal enactment of fragmentation, a corporeal articulation of the existential ennui that assails his life as a diasporic subject.

The novel also renders the diasporic bodies as no/bodies, invisible to the white Americans. In a moment in the novel when Stephanos accompanies Kenneth to a car dealership to purchase a car, the American car dealers do not take note of their presence despite their attempts at modest dressing. No matter how much the diasporic body is clothed, it remains invisible in the American racist society mediated in the text. Diasporic bodies are also presented as somnambulists that only wake up to sleep and sleep to wake up, in terms of the novel; 'we own stores, live in run-down apartments, spend afternoons gazing lazily out of windows...' an excerpt which eloquently articulates the characters' deprivation and sense of brokenness.

For Kenneth the Kenyan, his brown and bent teeth is a constant reminder of his 'Kenyaness', and as he puts it, 'You can never forget where you came from if you have teeth as ugly as these'. His anomalous teeth accentuates his sense of 'otherness' as a diasporic subject and foregrounds his alienation despite his attempts to assimilate into American life.

The corporeality of the three African immigrants Stephanos, Joe and Kenneth is an embodiment of painful traumatic memories of Africa. They engage in quizzing over the ubiquitous coups and wars in Africa, they are alive to the coup experiences in their continents, it is as if these histories of coups and revolts are written on their bodies and perpetually act on them. It is not lost to the reader that this past history is what strengthens their diasporic solidarity. They exhibit the same yearnings for home as victim Diasporas.

Stephanos' uncle, Berhane also leads a fragmented life in America. His body is also a site of trauma and memory, as a witness of the atrocities in Ethiopia during the Red Terror, trauma is etched permanently in his mind. A part reading of one of the letters he writes seeking intervention from American political leadership attests to this trauma:

Dear President Carter,

You may have read yesterday in New York Times article on the current crisis in Ethiopia. The newspaper says that there are widespread reports of arrests and disappearances throughout the country. I want to tell you personally that these disappearances are in fact executions. This month alone, I have learned of the death of at least ten friends of mine. There are many more...Those that died were all taken from their homes in front of their wives and children. My brother-in-law, Shibrew Stephanos, was one of those men. He was beaten in front of his wife and two sons by government troops and then carried out of his house....Shibrew Stephanos was a good man and an excellent father. I implore you not to let his death, and the death of so many others like him, pass in vain.

The traumatizing atrocities taking place in his country 'intensify the trauma of his present sense of alienation and displacement' (Chigwedere: 177). For, as Cathy Caruth discerns it, 'trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena' (Caruth: 181).

Clearly, Ethiopia's past terror finds articulation in the body of Berhane. His sense of identity, like that of his nephew Stephanos, is embedded in Ethiopia, their home and their anguished thoughts point to their traumatic dislocation in the hostile diasporic space that they occupy. One can venture to argue that the disintegration of their county signifies the demise of their corporeality. The traumatic events at home exacerbate their ontological stress in the diaspora and engenders acute fragmentation. Presently, Berhane leads a fragmented existence as

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a cab driver in a reversal of fortune, a situation aggravated by the fact that his fiancée has been denied a visa to travel to the US, which disappointment he drowns by heavy drinking throughout the night.

African-Americans also experience debilitating diasporic experience as can be seen in the absurdist portrayal of Mrs Mais. She is occasionally seen sweeping the entire street in her neighbourhood at Logan Circle. This absurdist antic can be read as a corporeal articulation of her disenchantment which she attributes to the gentrification of the neighbourhood. The hostile relationship between her white American neighbour Judith, whom she blames for this gentrification project serves to show racial tension between the white Americans and African-Americans which exists in the American society albeit in subtle and veiled ways.

The plight of the diasporic subject is further evidenced in the absurdist depiction of the arsonist who sets fire on Judith's house in Logan Circle. His image of an oversize body on a small bicycle wandering daily in Logan Circle armed with his tools of trade is at once absurdist and comical. He is another wandering diasporic body who has been evicted from his house to pave way for the gentrification of the estate, a black body 'unable to conform physically to the fabric of the society in which he lives', (Punday:64) and one which 'provides the raw elements, the data necessary for the production of knowledge'(Grosz: 97).

The novel terminates with a gesture towards the integration of the diaspora subjects. Stephanos observes that " a man struck between two worlds lives and dies alone" .Feeling that he has been suspended between a life in America and an imaginary return home, he takes the bold step to accept America as home, fully cognizant of the fact that there would be no return to Ethiopia. He walks back to his shop, happy to claim it as entirely his. Sepha Stephanos, whose corporeality is frequently dispersed in the space of the novel realizes the need to centre himself by embracing migranhood and striving towards afropolitanism, towards 'being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity' (Orlando: 276).

### Conclusion

The characters analyzed in this novel occupy a corporeality that the racist culture of the text designates as heavily embodied, they occupy a diasporic corporeality that leads to aghast and alienation. Though these diasporised characters have maintained strong sentimental links with their counties of origin, the text gestures towards global cosmopolitanism.

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