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Transnational Mobility and Space in Sefi Atta's Short Stories "Green" and "Housekeeping"

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Abstract
This paper takes Bill Ashcroft's notion of the Transnation and his interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's smooth and striated spaces to look into the transnational mobility of the immigrant population to and within the United States of America through the lenses of Sefi Atta's problematic and complex immigrant narratives in two of her short stories, "Green" and "Housekeeping". The paper delves into the kinds of mobilities that immigrants experience within a foreign space, explores their interaction with the different spaces, places and non-places that is shaped by their own cultural understanding, their national roots and the routes they choose in the host nation, both literally and metaphorically. It looks into the ideological forces that condition these interactions in an ever-baffling search for home and belongingness.
Key Words: Transnation, mobility, space, non-place, othering, belonging, immigrant

Introduction

The search for land, for better opportunities, for better conditions of living and livelihood is a quest as old as the human civilization. However, this search entails a mobility that has been steadily problematised in tandem with the progress of civilization, with scientific and technological advancement. The human spirit has always demonstrated two antithetical propensities: the search for roots and a keen desire for the newness of routes, which best summarizes the phenomenon of gated communities, bounded nations and the collective entity on the one hand; and extensive travel, exploration, discoveries on the other. This aspiration has been greatly complicated by the legacy of colonialism that along with the clash of cultures has brought about complexities of thought in the notions of binaries, of xenophobic tendencies and a fluidity of movement following globalisation. The mass exodus of people from a place to another on the geographical plane, immigration, voluntary or involuntary, propelled by domestic trauma or a search for better education or employment in the postcolonial world is problematised consistently by the rooted and sedentary tendencies of a group. Many theorists have argued that the notion of a nation is relatively new, born out of a desire to keep the outsider out, while many recent theories propose that the fluidity of movement in the twenty-first century has started to eat away at the definitive construct of a nation, that we are steadily moving towards the post-nation state. It is in this context that this paper seeks to examine the idea of a transnation as proposed by Bill Ashcroft, the different kinds of mobilities exhibited in the transnational and immigration process and the various ideological planes that an immigrant moves about in a host country that conditions and presupposes interactions. This analysis proceeds through the two short stories "Green" and "Housekeeping" by the Nigerian author Sefi Atta, who deals with the complex human behaviour caught in transnational and transcultural limbo.

Transnation and Mobile Spaces:

The layman's understanding of the term 'transnational' presupposes all forms of interactions and movements taking place beyond the boundaries of a national territory. However, the notion is more complex and nuanced than that. For a clearer understanding as well as for creating a premise for this paper, let us refer to Bill Ashcroft's (2017: 46) interpretation of the term:

> I propose the term 'transnation' to describe the movement of peoples within (and only sometimes across) the geographical boundaries of the nation-state yet who circulate around the boundaries of the state in ways that render the nation less and less instrumental in the framing of identity.

In this context let us first distinguish between the concepts of nation and state. While state is an institutional and ideological entity that frames laws and presupposes obedience to the hierarchical power structure and offers stability in exchange, the nation is a more complex, cultural construct of homogeneity pre-empted by shared history, language, religion and socio-cultural practices. It is nation that is more intrinsic to individual and collective identity. Transnation would thereby qualify as a grey space, an admixture of the striated, limiting,habitual, homogeneous, ideological space of the state and the fluid, liminal, sporadic, heterogenous smooth space of the nomad, the consistently moving body of people, who negotiate different routes within or outside the abstraction that is the nation-state. The two spaces are not polarised or antagonised, but exist in relational difference with one another, as "the flow of people in their ordinary lives" (Ashcroft 2017: 47).

Ashcroft traces this continuous flow of people to the enticing possibilities of a postcolonial, global, cosmopolitan city (2017: 47).He argues that the idea of transnation shifts the locus of control from the state to the individual, and relocates the centre-periphery binary, creating a projected utopian space that diffuses the boundaries of the state, the necessity of national belongingness that populate the migrant imagination. It is a space that is full of liberating possibilities. However, if we refer to the Foucauldian argument, each space is an embodiment of both enslaving and liberating tendencies. The immigrant does not aspire to a space, he aspires to what Marc Auge (1995: 52, 82) calls an 'anthropological place', having traces of events, lores and history, a location that gives them an identity in relation to others, a space that Cresswell (2006: 3) argues is "imbued with meaning and power".It is through consistent interaction and negotiation with the geographical, political and cultural space that an immigrant creates his own place in a host(ile) nation.

One of the constant means of negotiation in a foreign land is through mobility. Migration itself is a process which subsumes a vast displacement, both individual and cultural, an exchange, a negotiation marked by the absence of a parent culture and the presence of an overarching foreign culture. This displacement is not easy and is certainly not the end of the story. The true story of immigration begins at the arrival point to a host nation, the transnational movement within its boundaries and territories, mediated through access, power and control of resources in an increasingly clefted world. The mobility that ensues after immigration is the theme of this paper, which explores the constant negotiation of roots and routes that any immigrant is subject to, "…that produce(s) new modes of constructing identity and result in zones of graduated sovereignty based on accelerated flows of capital, people, cultures, and knowledge"(Low et al 2003: 26).

Any kind of movement, observes Tim Cresswell significantly (2006: 6), is laden with meaning, "the product and producer of power" (Ibid 2006: 2). The movement can be horizontal over a geographical plane, or vertical over a socio-economic plane of power through the agentic institutions of education, employment and skills. The postcolonial migrant is a product of the economy of late capitalist forces, that has acted as an enabler for the creation of new territorial relationships (Low et al 2003: 25). The migrant influx has entailed a renegotiation of the homogeneity of the striations of the state territory, lending it an elasticity and malleability of cultural expressions alongside subversions of the same. The stories selected for this paper are located in American cities, a country which is known to exhibit both xenophilic and xenophobic tendencies, which sells itself as a promised land for the immigrants, rejoicing in pluralism and accommodating of multiplicity and multivocality (Cresswell 2006: 187). However, an immigrantoperates on the knowledge of his otherness the minute he lands on foreign soil:

> The word 'immigrant' rather than relating to an actual event of movement, becomes a euphemism for 'not from this place', or for 'one who belongs somewhere else', …this conceptualization of immigrant… remains a political tool for marginalising or racializing the other. (Kalra et al 2005: 14)

The ambivalence in the immigrants, the constant duality of perception that results from "seeing oneself through the eyes of others" (Webner in Quayson and Daswani 2013: 107), demonstrates the flaw in the utopian projection of the transnation as a space sans boundaries, a place where nation ceases to be the primary identity marker because the cultural truth reinforces the operation of the post-colonial nation-state on the basis of exclusionary politics, where the idea of a super-citizen, as in so many other binary constructions, belies the existence of the Other, the non-citizen:Citizens require the production of others to be possible, and the definition of citizen carries around the non-citizen or the shadow citizen as part of its constitution. (Cresswell 2006: 161)

My contention in this paper, as explored through the selected short stories, is that while the notion of constant othering remains an undeniable truth, which engenders the diasporic nostalgia, absence and an ever-elusive search for home, the immigrant is not always the hapless othered, the immigrant participates in othering too and this participation is mediated through mobility in transnational spaces. The event of finally belonging to a foreign nation is an extremely complex dialogue, necessitating assimilation into and knowledge of the host territory and culture. But this physical relocation does not necessarily pre-empt mimicry and relocation of the rooted mindscape, a movement away from native identity. It is a choice, and successful assimilation is not always hinged on the complete foregoing of the native cultural identity. However, it also stands true that a host nation such as America, like many other European countries, has a subliminal coded discourse of the straight, white, wealthy, male as the normative standard of citizenship and even the most minor deviations are brought into focus. The acceptance of the immigrant as a permanent resident moves through systems of power, through notions of ideal citizenry, who have additive value to the host nation-state, striations that expect the fluidity, smoothness and unpredictability of the migrant group to mellow into obedience and appreciation of the host culture and expectations. The movement within and around the smooth spaces therefore is mediated by the striations of the state. So, the transnational smooth space I would argue is not entirely liberating because it presupposes obedience, based on the intrinsic need of an individual to belong.

Analysis of the nature of transnational mobilities in "Green" and "Housekeeping":

The postmodern world has witnessed the rapidity of travel due to the proliferation of new technologies. Our world has slowly compressed spaces into reachable entities and the nature of labour in the new world norms has also ensured greater mobility. This increased mobility, especially reliant on the travel and tourism sector has called for the creation of certain spaces of transit, of temporary interactions, which Marc Auge calls non-places. I would argue that these non-places are the true spaces of transnationalism because an individual is known primarily by a name, a serial number, a room number, an address or some other relatively impersonal anonymous designation. A person's entity and engagement in these places is relatively transient, it is a go-between space where apparently the ideological constraints of the greater ideological society are suspended for the time being. Marc Auge names these places as hotels, airports, superstores, railway stations, places of constant travel, of supermodernity.

The two short stories by Sefi Atta chosen for analysis are located in such a non-place, a place of temporary transactions- the immigration office in the first story, "Green", and a hotel in the second story, "Housekeeping". I will analyse how these two sites, non-places become contested spaces of the transnation, of the smoothness of anonymity and movement and the striationof rules and their expected obedience, and in the process look at how mobility conditions the arbitrations in these spaces.

Sefi Atta's strategy in presenting the complexities of the immigrant experience through the eyes of a nine-year-old narrator in the short story "Green" is a masterful one because it both simplifies and complicates the migrant mobility narrative and a child's voice renders it a quality of truth and sentience. It is a story about the final acceptance of the narrator's parents into the American system as permanent residents. However, the irony of the narrative is that it is told from the point of the nine-year-old girl, who is already an American citizen by the virtue of her birth, and who has developed a certain objectivity of perception and a distance from her parents being a first-generation Nigerian-American. The primary location of the "puppet show" (240), a passe at the American puppet masters who play with the immigrants' expectations, is the non-place immigration office, the impersonalised

space of pretension, where the narrator's parents have been passing off as the ideal American citizens for the past nine years. It is mentioned that this wait has come at a personal cost of not being able to attend a beloved father's funeral among other things. This office completely fits in with the characterization of a non-place because a majority of the interactions are clipped by regulatory linguistic pointers. It is a place of temporary in-betweenness where the applicants await their turn at receiving their green cards.

However, it is interesting how subtle homogenising tendencies play out even within this space of collective immigrant identity:"There are people who look Chinese to me, but whenever I say this, Mom says, They're not all Chinese!" (241)As the narrative progresses, the narrator's changing relationship with the colour green is symbolic of the ambivalence of an immigrant and a first-generation Nigerian-American for her home and host nations. Green moves from the negative and/or distant connotations of unpalatable vegetables, the emotion of envy, the distant Nigerian flag and the colour of her parents' passports to the positive association of tasty sprinkles, Mardi Gras beads, and the colour of competition of the rival football team. The quandary of conflicting identity in the attempt to settle down in American life is revealed best in the following conflation of the colour green:"Green is for thecolorI like most- yellow. Green is for a colour I can't stand- blue. Green is a mixture of blue and yellow. Green is for confusion." (245)

This seemingly innocuous statement metaphorically describes the confluence of othering and emancipatory experiences of the common American life. The narrator hides her parents' culinary choices, is infuriated at her classmates laughing at African clothes, at the same time has assimilated into the American life of freedom, where girls are given a fair chance, as her mother says, where she enjoys playing soccer, traditionally a man's game. Her parents are highly qualified working professionals, her mother is a lecturer, her father a doctor, who are affluent middle-class immigrants dwelling in Mississippi. Their application for the permanent residence is approved because of the value that the skilled immigrant brings to the national table. The father after his acceptance as a permanent residence makes a significant argument about the state of the American policy towards immigration, fuelled by capitalism, especially relevant at a time when the nation is fraught with the immigrant crisis, and a lack of adequate representation of the marginalised native community:"Even if they don't have any talent," Dad says, rubbing his chin. "They have the money to import talent. Did you hear of that fourteen year old? Highest paid in the soccer leagues. Freddy Adu. His family came from Ghana. Immigration will save America." (247)

The characters in the story are not named, which grants a certain degree of universality to the Nigerian immigrant experience in particular as well as to the general immigrant experience in America. The characters are upwardly mobile people, who demonstrate adequate involvement with and knowledge of the American way of life: the father is really involved in the American political landscape with his definitive points of view about the second-term presidential election of Barrack Obamaand the mother demonstrates her knowledge of the local Mississippi landscape in the way she predictably rattles off names each time they return from the immigration office. There is a lot of movement in the story, in the journey from Mississippi to the immigration office in New Orleans and back, in the movements to school, to church masses, in the flow of ordinary everyday American life. But there is a mainstream status to these movements, which is consolidated with the final movement of the girl narrator across the football field, a girl of Nigerian descent playing an American sport, having the embodiment of the American dream in her red jersey and her number 00, a mathematical constant, having additive place value, which when added to another number magnifies exponentially. This movement signifies the steady growth of the acceptable immigrant into the American dream:"Me, scoring. My mom looking like she loves soccer. My dad looking like he really loves the President. Three of us, looking like we really belong." (247)This description symbolises the movement of America from an abstract *space* to a *place* of identity and partial rootedness in the narrator's imagination. However, the double use of the adjective 'really' points out to the subliminal discourse of the state of flux and unbelongingness that is also a part of this migrant narrative.

The second story "Housekeeping" is also about a Nigerian female doctor located geographically in Mississippi, taking up a temporary space in her Memorial Day weekend travel to her cousin Bolaji in Atlanta. So, the mobility here is from Mississippi to a non-place of intermittent affiliation, that is the

hotel space and then to her cousin's place. However, the latter part of the journey is not charted in the story. The establishment where the central character, Abiodun stays, is an unglamorous, shifty establishment, not her usual hotel, where she puts up. This unfamiliarity sets up an immediate estrangement from the space, which is doubly enhanced by the food stains in the microwave and stickiness of the kitchenette floor. The smells of the space are a significant reminder of her temporary stay: the strong smell of the curry from the neighbouring room, where a long-term Indian guest cooks and the smell of bleach with which the story ends. While she chafes ironically against the curry smell, the exhausted Abiodun reflects on her American life. She thinks of the small acts of xenophobia that she encounters along with her other immigrant doctor friends, the Hispanic Fernandez, the Pakistani Khan, a curious motley group who discuss politics and their immigration wrongs. She has her moments of saturation with the constant othering, that put her in an existential bind and these are the times when the private practice in Nigeria seems almost enticing:There are days when she wants to pack up and leave, especially when a patient looks suspiciously at her in the ER or when someone mispronounces her name." (26)The point to bear in mind here is that all of them highly-qualified and skilled professionals who avail opportunities that America has for the qualified immigrant. Her cousin Bolaji advises her to anchor roots and invest her abundant income in foreclosed properties like he does. She has a certain distaste for the Nigerian-American acquisition mentality:"She finds Nigerian in Atlanta acquisitive, Nigerians in America in general. Professional Nigerians. They have that "we have arrived" mentality: buy, buy, buy." (25)

This economic acquisition in the foreign land makes the assimilatory process more palatable for many. Fernandez treats the othering through jokes, Khan through general reticence and Abi through feigned ignorance and sometimes by being upfront. She tolerates her white colleagues mispronouncing and curtailing her name, remarks on her cousin's increasingly Americanised accent. But even the apparent acceptance of the talented doctor is refuted by the only American's seemingly innocent question:"The first time they met, Linda had asked, "So what is an African doctor doing around here?" (25-26)This is reminiscent of Celeste's innocuous question to the narrator in "Green": "What's it like being an African?" (245)These questions point to the myth located centrally in the American immigrant narrative, a curious mixture of acceptance and othering, operating on a plane of relative difference. This difference in racial, class, religious affiliations from the norm is consistently repeated and highlighted. This is the reason why the immigrants hold on to their native culture for some kind of rooted mooring in navigating the slippery routes of the American immigrant experience:

> "Ogedengbe. I'll spell it."
>
> She has never learned the phonetic alphabet. *O* as in *ostrich,* she says, *G* as in *graduate*, *E* as in *Eagle*. She can't think of an *N* word except for *Nigerian*. (27) (emphasis as in original)

There is a veiled reference to Islamophobia in Khan's post 9/11 reticence and Areeba's confusion with the Catholic religion in "Green". As Cresswell (2006: 189) enunciates: "The fact of American xenophilia- the idea of the United States as an immigrant nation- only serves to make perceived failure and difference all the more disturbing". So, while the country appreciates appropriately skilled labour, it simultaneously others them as well because they go against the grain of the normative white standard. However, in this complex assimilatory process, that is expected of the iconic 'good' immigrant entity, the immigrant participates in the othering. This plays out in the non-space of the hotel in this story, a space which anthropologically is a supposedly liberated space of striated expectations.

The hotel fulfils the criteria of the transnational non-space, where Abiodun is stripped off her name and is represented by a room number. But her anonymity is not liberating. Owing to her germophobe nature, she cleans and wipes all surfaces herself and is shocked when the Hispanic cleaner, who clearly demonstrates broken English, bespeaking her liminal existence, uses the same brush to clean the toilet and sink in her room. Dissatisfied with the overall ambience and particularly with the service of the cleaner, Abiodun complains to the hotel housekeeping manager. However, this complaint marks her return to the striated space of state expectations because she unwittingly costs the cleaner her job. The irony here is that while she sympathises with her Hispanic friend Fernandez and worries about his addiction to sleeping pills, she others the Latina cleaner by commenting on her lack of

training. Her attempts to rescue the cleaner's job fall flat because as a member of the cheap unskilled labour class, the cleaner is disposable. Abiodun's tip of twenty dollars speaks of her survivor's guilt. The important thing that the story conveys so remarkably at this point is that while both Abiodun and the Latina cleaner are stuck at in an immigration limbo, awaiting a permanent residence in the official system, Abiodun's chances at getting approval stand higher than the cleaner as a highly skilled participant in the American workforce. The cleaner, on the other hand, has a more fraught and liminal existence in the system as a "threateningly mobile" immigrant identity as opposed to Abiodun's "appropriately mobile" immigrant identity (Cresswell 2006: 189). As a member of the affluent class, Abiodun is not wrong in her expectation of clean service from a place of financial transaction, but her subscription to higher standards of normative behaviour comes at a humane cost. It is this constant negotiation of behaviour, of power, of a separate identity, that leaves her exhausted:She is tired. She has been tired since she moved to America. (27)

Conclusion:

Both the short stories are located in the location of the transnational non-space that charts the nature of mobility of the immigrant population and the constant negotiation in a new territory. They refer to the mobility and aspiration towards the fulfilment of the goal of citizenship. While the protagonists in "Green" complete that journey, for those in "Housekeeping" the journey remains frustratingly fraught, tempered further by differences in class and education and the expectation of the American capitalist economy. Both stories complicate the simplistic notion of a transnational space as a utopian extension of the transnational dream of an unbounded world full of possibilities. In the present world, which is increasingly headed towards totalitarianism and 'ethnic singularity' (Low et al 2003: 29), the national identity does feature as an important marker of identity vis a vis the state affiliation, which is terminable in the holistic discourse of the post-modern identity. The smooth space's, the immigrant's hankering for a home, for a place in the world, for a national root is more prolifically highlighted in this transnational space, which though apparently without boundaries is gridded by cultural affiliations, shown adequately by the Punjabi-Indian diaspora's empathy and support for the Punjabi farmers, all over the world.

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