

From Ethiopia to America, the Longing and Attempts to return (home) in the Novel the Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears

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Abstract

In the novels, as in post-colonial literature, the motive of going back home has been prominent and thoroughly examined. Many researchers attribute the term "home" to various dimensions and disciplines. As the world changes through transnational migration, so does the concept of home, its meaning, how it is conceptualized, and the various aspects forming it. Thus, relating to home in the non-traditional fixated way is more suitable nowadays.

This paper, will examine the term home as both mobile and grounded simultaneously to understand better the meanings attributed to home. Thus, home as a term includes different aspects, as Blunt and Varley (2004) contended that the main elements of a home lay in its relationship with place, identity, and belonging. Each aspect is crucial for further demonstrating and understanding home as fluid and stable for immigrants.

Keywords

Literature, home, immigration, identity, transnational immigration

The relations of home and a place are essential, particularly when discussing immigrants' notions of home. In contemporary researches, in an era of transnational migration, the focus has shifted from perceiving home as a fixed place and examining the power of attachment to it (Casey, 1993; 1998 Heidegger, 1971), to studying the term as people's connection that transcends geography and time (Brettell, 2006; Datta, 2010).

Immigrants' everyday lives are influenced by the ways they maintain their political, social, and economic ties with both the origin and the new countries.

Therefore, it might lead to and nourish their abstention of choosing one society and place (Ali- Ali and Khoser, 2002 Basch et al. 1994). Thus, one must understand home for immigrants as a fluid, flexible term which lies between two poles of the same line – absent while presents and it can contain and hold both poles simultaneously (Morley, 2000).

Different researchers found that home is constructed through relationships formed with the people and through material objects. The objects help the individual cope with the new culture while aiding the formation of a sense of belonging and identity, not necessarily to their place in a certain moment. (Nowicka, 2006; 2007; Tolia- Kelly, 2004). If so, a home for immigrants is a place in the process of construction. It is stable and grounded while mobile and fluid. Therefore, it is important to implement the understanding driven from the research contenting that home can also be a process, a project in the making, "an entity in becoming" (Nowicka, 2007: 77). It is a matter of turning a place into a home, the way it is localized and is constructed through relations between humans and artifacts.

Some studies tried to explain the relations between a home and a place while using a general sense of belonging or being at home to describe it (Massey, 1994). Gurney (1997), Somerville (1997), and Brath (1996) described the home as a feeling partly related to the immersion in local society and the relationships forging a home and involve in identities formation.

While in the transnational immigration era, the sense of "being at home" is broader. Ahmed (1999) attempted to explain the experience on a broader scope, as being at home in the world, through a phenomenological view. The research perceives the term as a sense that does not link to a specific place rather than actions people do to feel at home (Gurney, 1997; Jackson, 1995). Some maintain constant connections across borders; thus, their identity is not attached to a specific place. They negotiate their various identities and form new identification methods with multiple locations simultaneously (Appadurai, 1996; Lam and Yeoh, 2004).

In this sense, a home contains current living and yearning conditions. The fluid, flexible identity doesn't exclude the will to have cohesive identification with a stable home (Varley, 2008).

For some immigrants, the notion of return home is connected to a certain extent to the forming and searching for a sense of self and part of their identity construction (Conway, 2005; Chritou, 2006).

Yet, it was found that returning home usually can't fulfill the need for a stable identity and one home. Still, every so often, immigrants portray ongoing ambivalence regarding this very notion. They acknowledge the changes that happen to them and their previous home (Ni Laoire, 2007, 2008 a,b). Thus, while encountering reality, as they sometimes feel they do not belong, the immigrants are forced to reexamine their self-identities as they negotiate the complex relations between identity and belonging (Ralph, 2009).

These relations are at the basis of belonging, as it is defined through both the individual's subjective feeling which is part of the various aspects of home: a place, identification, and social element that focus mainly on the individual ability to become part of society or to be excluded. Thus, belonging raises the question of association to neighborhoods, communities, and even states.

Inclusion and exclusion are the processes connected to the sense of immigrants' belonging and are dependent on the social categorization of immigrants by the majority group members. They either belong or don't belong to a particular group (Castles and Davidson, 2000). One reason for the inclusion or exclusion of an individual lies in the extent to which he resembles or differs from the rest of the group members in his expected behavioral norms. Those norms contain various cultural aspects such as language, clothing, looks, etc. Failing to meet the group expectations will result in excluding the individual. Social categorization serves as a means to highlight the features that the group members have in common (Nobel, 2002, 2005; Koefoed and Simonsen, 2007). Thus, while adopting external cues and practices, the immigrants reach a sense of belonging in the new homes (Gray, 2006; Kivisto, 2003).

Probyn (1996) argued that some immigrants react differently to rigid social categorization and behave in a non-conformist way. Their behavior is viewed as vital to forming a sense of belonging since it lays the foundation for immigrants belonging practices. The belonging practices are articulated in two ways: the 'being' as a repetition of expected social norms and the 'longing' that transcend the strict social categorization of either belonging or non-belonging (Walsh, 2006 a, b). Therefore, the sense of belonging is forged by using relations and practices in several spaces simultaneously, whether local, national or even universal in the immigrants' daily lives.

In this paper, I would also like to explore the psychological and cultural meaning of home, which tends to perceive the term "home" as a shelter, a place that protects the individual from external threats and provides security, stability, and a sense of belonging (Bachelard, 1969; Matari, 2005).

Unfortunately, many homes don't provide a sense of security and stability for the family members. They serve as threatening spaces inflicting traumas, verbal and physical abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. Those homes might pose an imminent threat and anxiety for their residents. However, even when the home experiences are not extreme, one might develop an unstable internal experience to the home space containing a sense of absence and danger. (Dorben, 2003).

While considering African American literature, specifically Ethiopian American literary pieces, one could conclude that "home" as a notion is everywhere while simultaneously nowhere to be found. Perhaps that might be the reason the topic is common in Ethiopian American novels.

This paper will examine the notion of "home" in one novel written by Ethiopian American writer Dinaw Mengestu. I will explore the vocabulary being used relating to this term.

Home- The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears

The novel begins with three African immigrants' weekly meeting at a local store owned by one of them, the protagonist, Sepha Stephanos. Most of the story is situated in Logan Circle, a poor African American neighborhood. When Stephanos opened his store in Logan Circle, as he describes, it "was still predominately poor, black, cheap, and sunk in a depression that had struck the city twenty years earlier and never left." (Mengestu, 2007:36). Stephanos moved to this neighborhood due to its neglect, as it serves in his mind as proof that America is not as great as one might assume, and that was all he could afford. (Mengestu, 2007:14). It is mentioned on numerous occasions that Stephanos, most of the time, doesn't like America.

The plot unfolds as a new character moves into the neighborhood; a white woman named Judith with her daughter Naomi. She renovates one of the neighborhood houses, thus turning the house from wreckage to a beautiful place to live.

Upon Judith's arrival, it seems that Logan Circle is starting to change. Before her arrival, Stephanos mentions that "these were the only reasons white people had ever come into the neighborhood: to deliver official notice, investigate crimes, and check up on the children of negligent parents." (Mengestu, 2007:18). The store, as do the neighborhood, is failing. The protagonist is unsatisfied with the life he conducts "what I have here was not a life, but a poorly constructed substitution." The protagonist feels as if he can be invisible and assimilate into the scenery in this neighborhood.

To understand Sephas' home notion, we first must understand the events that led him to leave Ethiopia. Sepha leaves Ethiopia after his father's execution, who took responsibility for the pro-revolution flyers Sepha handed to people. Upon his arrival to America, Stephanos moves in with Berhane, his uncle. He wishes to return to Ethiopia, and he was confident it would happen soon. Therefore, he was reluctant to make any connections with his surroundings. Sepha recalls the conversation with Berhane about America and the way he felt "I didn't know if he saw in me a flicker of ambition or desire, but he need not have worried. I didn't want anything from America." (Mengestu, 2007: 139). The protagonist feels detached. In his mind, Sepha's attachment is to his homeland, and he refuses to acknowledge the new reality. He says, "how was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia?" (Mengestu, 2007: 140). The feeling of belonging to the origin society and Sepha's sense of self is related to Ethiopia. Throughout the book, Sepha struggles with his sense of belonging as he tries to construct his identity.

Only after his uncle's interference, he starts to work. He felt ashamed that he didn't do anything for two months, and he joins his uncle at the Capitol Hotel. "That was how my life in America started." (Mengestu, 2007: 140). Another example of his detachment is when the protagonist mentions that he used to daydream about his father, friends, and family during his first years in America, pretending to talk and consult with them. (Mengestu, 2007: 18).

Along the way, the protagonist embarks on his independent journey in life, quitting his work, buying the corner store in Logan Circle, moving out of his uncle's apartment. To some, that might be considered as a first step of assimilating into American society. Still, after carefully reviewing the reasons for Sepha's actions, it is clear that those deeds served to enable him to exclude himself from the host society.

An important issue the protagonist mentions on his way back to Logan Circle is the feeling of "home." He senses that his act can be named "going back home". He analyzes the term while claiming an inherent contradiction within the phrase. "A sense of moving forwards and backward at the same time" (Mengestu, 2007: 174). The narrator argues that this phrase holds the understanding that what is left behind has gone through changes. "I understand now that distant, faraway look I've seen in other immigrants when they talk about returning to whatever it was, they first came from" (Mengestu, 2007: 174). The notion of return home is present in Sepha's and the rest of the characters' thoughts. The protagonist articulates home as a term that combines a state where one is still longing for it while living in it. He explains that home is in the gap between the desired dream and reality for many immigrants. He, like many immigrants, recognizes he had changed the same way Ethiopia had changed.

Sepha's store and home

Sepha refrains from providing detailed descriptions of his apartment until he returns from having dinner in Judith's house. Beforehand, he described the external surrounding, the neighborhood's statue, and Judith's house. Afterward, he describes his house. He begins by describing the entrance to his apartment. The narrator feels that his apartment's atmosphere is limiting his thoughts and concerns to practical issues. It seems to him smaller and deserted after having dinner with Judith. He provides details about some second-hand items he has in his apartment. He also mentions his father and notably the different way his father perceive the importance of possessions in an individual's life (Mengestu, 2007: 60). I argue that Sepha's recognition of his apartment's poor state, the usage of the word "apartment" when describing his home as opposed to Judith's, and the use of old second-hand objects are not a coincidence. Sepha hadn't felt at home in America, and until meeting Judith, it didn't even accord to him he should aspire for more. As the researchers about the feeling of belonging argue, material objects are another way of forming a sense of home in the new country. Having almost no items that weren't previously owned by someone and that matter to him aside from his father's cufflinks is a clear indication of the difficulties Sepha had forming a sense of belonging and the much-needed buffer from society.

The different ways the characters understand belonging and the sense of home are imminent to the novel. The reader can follow many instances of critique regarding the past home's idealization. The one that illustrates it the most was During a conversation when the three friends Joseph Kahangi from Congo, Ken from Kenya, and Sepha Stephanos, met up in a bar. They look back at their past homes with sadness and a desire to return, some might say a nostalgic perspective. While Kenneth realizes the different circumstances in his life, since his father was illiterate. Thus, he does not feel he has a place to go back to quoting from his words:

"Exactly. That's it. That's all he ever was. A poor illiterate man who lived in a slum. And you know what that makes him in Africa? Nothing. That's what Africa is right now. A continent full of poor illiterate dying slums. What am I supposed to miss?" (Mengestu, 2007:185).

It is clear that Kenneth feels strongly about Africa, he knows what happens there, and he is mostly angry and disappointed with the situation.

This overview will also relate in to Sepha's store since it is the other place he spends most of his days in, and it should have been, at least according to his friend, his entrance ticket to American society. The store wasn't a huge success initially, but only after Judith and her daughter Naomi left, Sepha stopped taking care of it. He describes water stains on the ceiling, peeling paint off the walls, broken shelves and tiles rotten, expired food supplies and dust all over the place. The store is poorly managed, and Sepha can't pay his bills. When he received an evacuation notice he cracks and leaving his store unattended. Sepha went through a socio-psychological process. At first, he didn't want anything that has to do with America. Afterward, he was compliant with the cultural expectations society and his family had. When he felt he couldn't carry on, he decides to purchase the store. He used the store as a shelter from external society, as a buffer, his only possession. The store also served as a means to go through life without really living and meeting his own and society's expectations. Having met Judith and Naomi, he felt renewed urge to live life.

Sepha lost that spirit after failing to maintain an intimate relationship with Judith, and Naomi was sent to a boarding school. Sepha was heartbroken and found it hard to function and do everyday tasks. He neglects the store until he eventually loses it. (Mengestu, 2007)

Judith's home

Judith's house was in bad shape when she bought it. The narrator describes the house's state in detail "The house Judith was moving into was a beautiful, tragic wreck of a building ... A four-story brick mansion, it could have played the role of a haunted house in any one of a hundred movies or book" (Mengestu, 2007: 15). He goes into details about the roof tiles, the windows, shutters, and the exterior surroundings of the house. He also notes that it had been occupied by homeless men and other marginalized society members. What strikes me the most was the effort the narrator made in his descriptions. Needless to say, he wasn't so elaborate when it came to his house.

The protagonist first learns about Judith's life from the workers that are renovating her house. Sepha criticizes the workers' notion of knowing her "details that could, of course, come only from people who know your home so intimately they inevitably believe they've come to know something of you as well" (Mengestu, 2007 :17). It seems that the subtext of his criticism is related to the possibility of really knowing a person.

The neighborhood's population is starting to change. Sepha notices more white people there, although, in his opinion, Judith seems to be the most impressive one (Mengestu, 2007: 23).

When Sepha comes to dinner in Judith's house, she shares her difficulties raising her daughter and moving around from one place to another. They share an intimate moment holding hands which led Sepha to believe their relationship might develop. Only after he returned to his apartment, he notices its condition. (Mengestu, 2007).

To sum up, Sepha went through an emotional process in with he began rejecting everything that has to do with America while anticipating returning home. He lived through the motions while none of his life decisions was his. Furthermore, at the beginning he had zero accountability for the events. Having met Judith, it seems like he is more willing to be part of society and develop hopes for a future in America up to a certain point. Still, he second-guesses himself and their relationship while moving forward.

After leaving his store, he contemplated the events that led him to that point. Sepha returns to Logan Circle, which was the first time he used the term "go back home," he understands that nothing will ever be the same. The same way, immigrants while longing to return, know that they might return to a different reality.

I must note that it is almost as if Sepha is sabotaging his assimilation on purpose. After Judith leaves the neighborhood, he neglects his store. He physically leaves it unattended for hours.

Berhane's home

Berhane is referred to as an uncle even though the protagonist mentions that his relation to the family is not clear. "His exact relationship to my mother remains a mystery. He is not her brother" (Mengestu, 2007: 97). Sepha's referring to an elderly as an uncle is part of the Ethiopian culture's behavioral norms.

Berhane takes Sepha into his house. He lives in one of the poorer suburbs of Maryland, which contrasts to his life in Ethiopia. “A powerful, wealthy man, he lived just outside of Addis on a sprawling ranch” (Mengestu, 2007: 96). Berhane’s social and economic status has changed in America.

The building is an ethnic enclave mainly containing Ethiopian families who came to America after the revolution and realized they wouldn’t return. The language being used in the building is Amharic, and the narrator mentions that “living here is as close to living back home as one can get... precisely why my uncle has never left” (Mengestu, 2007: 116). Whereas the protagonist views the ethnic enclaves as bad and leaves the building as soon as possible, his uncle sees its advantages. He stays there probably because the building enables him to hold identity and practices significantly different from American society's practices.

Berhane had to leave Ethiopia abruptly, leaving behind everything he had. “He came to D.C. two years before me after having disappeared in the middle of the night without telling a single person. His house and all his possessions... were left perfectly intact”. (Mengestu, 2007: 97). He didn’t have the time to take memorabilia and to say goodbye to his loved ones. The decision to immigrate happened quickly. One might assume that staying in that building, although he doesn’t precisely fit the typical resident profile having no family around him, enables him to feel connected to Ethiopia and to have a piece for his homeland. (Mengestu, 2007: 116).

Throughout the novel, Berhane tries to write to government officials to gain their support and aid for Ethiopia. In the protagonist's view, the first letters are very innocent, as Berhane pled to be heard and acknowledged, while the rest are more of concerned with citizens' writings. In a letter written to President Carter, he wrote, “I am one of those people for whom nothing left of their home country” (Mengestu, 2007: 123). Sepha thinks that “Berhane is not, in fact, a citizen-only permanent resident, which he will remain until he dies, because in his heart, he will always be in Ethiopia” (Mengestu, 2007: 122). The protagonist refers to Berhane’s sense of belonging, his identity, and identification. His connection with the host society is limited to his work hours, and when returning home to the building, he actually returns to Ethiopian culture. In his limited spare time, he writes to government officials on behalf of his country in the hopes of helping his homeland.

In conclusion, it seems that Berhane’s “home” is not America, even though he understands he won’t be able to return to Ethiopia. He lives in a building that mimics customs, relationships, and language as it used to be in Ethiopia. His apartment is nicer than the exterior of the building, he is not an ordinary resident, and he keeps sending money back home. He is present physically in America, but emotionally he remained in Ethiopia.

Conclusions

The novel written by Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007), provides an excellent example of the importance of reading home as a mobile and fixed place while localized and extensive.

I assume Sepha and his Uncle never left home, but that’s not to say they didn’t go through a process that altered them. In the novel, the characters adjust to reality and struggle to construct a sense of self. At the same time, relationships with home and other people are being re-evaluated and given different meanings.

Although the characters in the novel are fictional, the story helps us understand the intertwined relations between home, belonging, and identity.

Acknowledging home as a settled and fixed place while mobile and fluid enables the individual to embrace the ambivalent situation of current living and the longed-for places. Furthermore, the sense of belonging and the ways home is experienced can’t be understood purely as a result of one’s efforts, but also consider social relations as an influencing factor.

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