



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Identity Crisis in Diaspora: A Study of Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears***

Dr. Nazakat Awan\*<sup>1</sup>    Dr. Muhammad Imran<sup>2</sup>    Dr. Sardar Ahmad Farooq<sup>3</sup>

1. Lecturer, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra, KP, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra, KP, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of English, Govt. Postgraduate College Mansehra, KP, Pakistan

**DOI**

[http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022\(6-II\)39](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022(6-II)39)

**PAPER INFO**

**ABSTRACT**

**Received:**

March 24, 2022

**Accepted:**

May 07, 2022

**Online:**

May 09, 2022

**Keywords:**

Alienation,  
Assimilation,  
Diaspora,  
Identity Crisis,  
Immigrants

**\*Corresponding  
Author**

nazakat.nazakat@g  
mail.com

Emerging social, political and cultural issues around the globe have found sufficient space in world literatures, thereby widening the scope and importance of literature in general and making it a critical vehicle of change. It is in the same vein that this research paper aims at examining the impacts of immigration on individual identity and the impediments faced by migrants in adaptation in the context of DinawMengestu's novel *The Beautiful things that Heaven Bears*. Applying William Safron's theory of diaspora, the study attempts to describe the identity crisis experienced by the protagonist. Textual analysis has been used as a research method for this study. The study suggests how the African immigrants undergo the experiences of identity crisis or what they face in terms of issues related to their identity. Protagonist stands for the migrants who face hard times in naïve cultures. Study will enrich readers' understanding of African diasporic literature.

**Introduction**

DinawMengestu hails from Ethiopia and settles in the United States of America. He is an eminent writer dealing mainly with the problems of migrants specifically belonging to Africa. His novel "*The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*" is primarily based on the theme of immigration and the issues related to identity. The novel is said to be inspired by the writer's own experience of immigration to America. SephaStephanos, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is a member of African diasporic community, who has moved from Ethiopia to America while trying to escape the brutal military coup that claimed his father's life and his family's fortunes. Sepha's voyage to America was initiated because of several horrible consequences that left his family torn and scarred for life. His father was captured, tortured and eventually murdered by the communist supporters. He was never given the chance to properly mourn for him, soon after his father's death he is hurriedly sent away by his mother. She fears that like her husband, her son would also be captured and killed. Sepha hitchhikes across Ethiopia by pawning off the pieces of jewelry given to him by

his mother and finally travels to the United States where his uncle BerhaneStephanos, an Ethiopian immigrant himself and a rather mysterious character takes him under his wing. Sepha along with his friends, Kenneth the Kenyan and Joe from Congo are all the Africans suffering from identity crisis. Despite the fact that he has been living in America for nearly two decades, Sepha is unable to mentally detach himself from his native land and its culture. And although he has been the part of a foreign culture, he has not been able to assimilate himself completely. He is undergoing the experience of what Bhaba refers to as "in-betweenness". Sepha is haunted by his past spent in his native land; he thinks of his country of birth; he dreams about local culture and the kin-network living back there. He has a white girlfriend Judith to which he shares his nostalgic feelings every now and then. He is desperate to flee back to his homeland. Even Ken the Kenyan and Joe from the Congo, who have seemingly blended so well into the American society and have gained more American culture's influence are unable to resist the anticipation of returning home. Berhane is another character who is Sepha's uncle. Both were compelled to leave their country out of security issues in Africa but they both suffer from identity crisis in America. Both have to take up the ordeal of reconstructing their identity to assimilate into the American culture while retaining their African identity.

Diasporic literature has close associations with post-colonialism and the theoretical assumptions used in both the areas of study exist in overlapping relationship. Since the novel under study is an African text, it has deep affinity with post-colonialism and post-colonial context per se. Owen Holland (2016) argues that postcolonial literature refers to the literature produced by those who have been affected by the entire process of colonization. In almost similar vein, Rafey Habib (2008) asserts that postcolonial literature is characterized by the legacy of colonization, the notion of Eurocentrism and how Eurocentric discourse is deconstructed by postcolonial theorists. African literature being akin to post-colonialism is the literature of resistance. Patrick Manning (2003) states that the African writers are the pioneers in the development of the postcolonial literary canon. Their stance against colonialism is the strongest and the clearest of all the formerly colonized nations. The current study focuses only on the issues related to immigration specifically identity crisis and the problems of assimilation in foreign culture.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Ashcroft and et al (2013), the word 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word 'Diaspeir' meaning scattering or dispersion of people from their native lands to foreign ones and they define 'deracination' as the practice of uprooting an individual, a group or a nation from their territory and relocating them to another. Arnold Ages (2008) gives a brief account of the history of diaspora. According to him the most well-known diasporas of all time are Jewish diaspora, African diaspora and the Armenian diaspora. He asserts that the term 'diaspora' is used to refer to the dispersion of Jews from Alexandria during the Greek conquest and later from Palestine following the Roman conquest. George Shepperson (1993), however, opines that 'diaspora' is not confined to the displaced Jewish people alone, but it is an inclusive term that incorporates all those who have been dislocated from their land of origin. The term 'African Diaspora' was also first coined by Shepperson. He used it for the displacement of the Africans during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trades. The

individuals among the displaced populations usually undergo the experiences of identity crisis and deracination as Said (2001) argues that people in diaspora are compelled to rethink and reform their sense of identity. He cites the example of African diaspora where millions of Africans were displaced from their native lands over a course of five centuries and they had to reconstruct their identity.

African diaspora is discussed by Bénédicte Ledent (2015) in her article *Reconfiguring African Diaspora in Dinaw Mengestu's The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. She foregrounds the problems faced by African diasporic community in developing relationship with the American whites. This article mainly deals with impediments in forming cohesion between the immigrants and the locals. The crux of her article bears no close affinity with the research at hand, so it is not relevant for this study. William Safran (1991) in his article *Diasporas in Modern Societies and Myths of Return* illustrates defining features of diaspora and presents some common denominators shared by people living in diaspora. Safran (1991) argues that diaspora refers to those who are away from their homelands, for any reason, and they either wish to remain connected with their country of birth or they want to go back. They carry a sense of detachment and long for being connected with the native culture. So the urge for connectivity with and feeling of detachment from the native country and experiential difficulty in assimilation with the foreign culture underlie, among other facets, the Safran's diasporic model.

The afore-mentioned theorists in Diasporic studies have given detailed description of diaspora and its multiple facets in varied social contexts. The theoretical canons presented by these theorists could be exploited for different research studies related to post-colonialism and diasporic experiences. However, keeping in view the objectives and research questions formulated for the current study, William Safran's theoretical model bears close relevance with the task at hand. It may well be exploited for this research as this paper aims at examining the problems faced by immigrants with regard to their identity and assimilation in a foreign culture.

It must, however, be reiterated that all the migrants may not necessarily undergo similar kinds of diasporic experiences because as a matter of fact, there are several other factors or variables which define migrants' experiences. The psychological make-up of an individual is also an important indicator which impacts such experiences to a great extent. In case of those individuals who face psychological and cultural hardships in acculturation, Safran's assumptions bear a good deal of significance. Much at par with the research objectives formulated for the current study, the chief focus is laid on the following characteristic features of diasporic experiences as illustrated by Safran. They are as follows:

1. Diasporic individuals feel nostalgic about their home country and consistently long for it.
2. They may well be viewed as uprooted individuals in an alien land undergoing blatant episodes of identity crisis.
3. They face seriously damaging problems in being assimilated to a target culture.

In addition to being haunted by the feelings of the past and homeland culture, they have hard time adjusting in a new culture. They literally find themselves in a no-man's land with psychological condition marked with ambivalence. This study is qualitative in nature and textual analysis has been employed as a research method. Important and relevant passages and quotes will be culled from the novel in order to support the research argument. These paragraphs will serve as textual evidence to substantiate the claims made by the researchers. Using textual analysis for this qualitative study, the researchers will attempt to examine and interpret the worldviews which affirm protagonist's experience of identity crisis and his difficulty in assimilation. The present study is likely to bridge important research gaps and will contribute to the existing corpus of knowledge especially the existing body of criticism on the novel under study. The focal point of this study will be to analyze the exilic experience and the factors augmenting the sense of nostalgia and un-belonging endured by the protagonist of the novel *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*.

### **Methodology**

Textual analysis has been used as a research method for this study. Textual analysis that is qualitative exploits variety of theoretical traditions that fall under an interpretive umbrella. Theoretical foundations for textual analysis within communication scholarship draw on symbolic interaction, phenomenology, critical theory (such as race and feminist theories), and ethnography, to name but a few (McKee, 2003). In the backdrop of present study this method deemed appropriate to bring at surface the underlying issues in texts hence about identity consciousness in modern era.

### **Results and Discussion**

Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* explores and delineates the African diasporic experience from the eyes of an Ethiopian immigrant living in the United States. It questions and highlights the haunting consequences of immigration and the trauma that comes along with exile by mainly focusing on the protagonist's tale of deracination. Displacement weaves an atmosphere of immense confusion in Mengestu's novel and it initiates the protagonist's search for identity and acceptance in a land that is starkly different from the one he hails from. The novel is very much reflective of the author's own state of mind. The protagonist's close friend draws an analogy of being away from home land is like being trapped in hell. Sepha seems to concur with this view because he himself is facing a similar traumatic situation. His other two friends are also immigrants from Africa. They also have the same feelings of being deracinated from their own country.

Sepha from the moment he arrives on the American soil is confused about his place in a country completely different from his own. In the beginning when he arrives in America, he makes no attempt to assimilate to the foreign culture. He admits that America is a land of opportunities and is far more secure than his home town, but he cannot properly adjust himself. He does not glorify this country and remains overwhelmed by the feelings of nostalgia notwithstanding political instability in his homeland. He undergoes the feeling of ambivalence - partial fascination with the foreign culture and a growing sense of detachment from the native land at the same time. "What was it my father used to say? A bird stuck between two branches gets

bitten on both wings. I would like to add my own saying to the list now, Father: a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone." (Mengestu 2006, p. 228)

The protagonist's psychological condition can best be illustrated by drawing on the concept of 'third space' given by a postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha. According to Bhabha (1994), identity crisis is induced whenever an individual or a group is exposed to two diverse cultures, because of this cultural clash, the individual or the group often feels suspended somewhere in-between, this in-betweenness was termed as 'third space'. Sepha almost has similar feelings of being entangled in and torn between two cultures simultaneously. As a result, he experiences an identity crisis. Not for a single moment can he free himself from the thoughts of his native village. Everything he does in one way or another reminds him of Ethiopia, of the village he grew up in and his mother and brother. The memory of his late father never leaves him. "How was I supposed to live in America, when I had never really left Ethiopia?" (Mengestu 2006, p.140).

Sepha's inability to adapt to a new culture basically stems from his oversentimental relationship or attachment with his home country. This notion is very much aligned with Safran's argument that an individual or community living in diaspora has great difficulty to associate itself with the alien culture owing to emotional attachment with the native culture. Sepha tries to strike balance between the two cultures but is left only with a sense of alienation and vulnerability. Identity crisis makes it difficult for him to develop and maintain relationship with the white Americans. This is evidenced by the fact that in his seventeen years stay in the US, he has only two friends who are immigrants like him. He never becomes successful in carving an identity which he could own. In fact, he only displays a false sense of identity in America.

One of the major reasons why Sepha faces the difficulty of assimilation in target culture is the fact that he holds onto the past and all the sorrows that come along with it occupy his mind thereby leaving little room for anything else. Majority of the course of the novels follows Sepha's nostalgic ruminations about his homeland, the village he grew up in, the violent Communist Revolution that tore Ethiopia apart and scattered its people, the death of his father, his mother and brother who are still living in Ethiopia and whom Sepha hasn't seen for seventeen years. Seventeen years on, and the memory of his silence and his escape remains a cardinal focus of his consciousness and his conversations, mainly because his silence cost his father his life. When he first arrives in America, he lives with his uncle Berhane, who is himself a man rooted deeply in a time long gone. Uncle Berhane in Ethiopia was a wealthy and influential individual whereas in America, he lives in a small, shabby and somewhat gloomy apartment building which is predominantly occupied by Ethiopians who fled their native country during the Ethiopian Red Terror. An uncle Berhane like Sepha is a classic example of a diasporic individual suffering from an identity crisis. Uncle Berhane refuses to acknowledge the fact that he is not in Ethiopia anymore, while living in the United States, he has created a world of his own where he carries on and keeps the values of his forefathers alive through small acts of defiance against the American lifestyle and culture. He finds the American culture provocative and based entirely on selfishness. Sepha is also somewhat like his uncle in this regard because unlike his fellow African immigrants he does not idealize America to the extent that

he considers it without fault, he has his misgivings about America. "If possible, I would have denied myself the right to breathe another country's air or walk on its grounds." (Mengestu 2006, p.44)

The protagonist of the novel is haunted by the idea of returning to his homeland and this desire for homecoming is shared by expatriates and thus characterizes diasporic experiences. According to Safran (1991), diasporic individuals or communities share a collective consciousness regarding their exilic state and they cherish and fantasize about the day they will return to their own lands. The characters of Sepha, Joe, Ken and Berhane all face this dilemma. All of them yearn for Africa, they keep telling themselves and their families back home that they will return someday. "There is safety in numbers that goes beyond any home." (Mengestu 2006, p.226) The consistent presence of Judith in his life, however, ultimately marks a turning point in Sepha's life. It is because of her that he ultimately prepares himself to assimilate in the target culture. Sepha faces certain vicissitudes of fate in business matters in the US but he understands more than anything else the pain of being forced out of one's home under haphazard conditions and having to face the frightening ordeal of building a new life, away from one's family in a new place all over again. He decides to keep his native heritage and all that comes along with it with him because that made him who he is but at the same time he resolves to give a chance to living a better life in America.

## **Conclusion**

Two research questions formulated at the outset have governed and driven this research. The purpose of this study was to examine diasporic experiences as to how they lead towards problems like identity crisis and assimilation in a foreign culture. The following theoretical assumptions suggested by William Safran (1991) have been employed for analysis.

- a. Diasporic individuals feel nostalgic about their home country and consistently long for it.
- b. They may well be viewed as uprooted individuals in an alien land undergoing blatant episodes of identity crisis.
- c. They face seriously damaging problems in being assimilated to a target culture.

Through a textual analysis of the novel *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* by Dinaw Mengestu, the researchers have concluded that the immigrants from Africa undergo numerous struggles and psychological problems of adjustment in the United States of America. Through the character of Sepha, the protagonist, the novelist describes how diasporic experiences trigger identity crisis and how Sepha along with his close friends experience a psychological state of ambivalence or in-betweenness. The instances quoted from the novel bear textual evidence to substantiate the same. The immigrants want to grab opportunities to facilitate their lives but they have a consistent growing sense of detachment from their homeland due to which they have hard time assimilating into American culture. Sepha, being deracinated from native culture and not being acculturated, displays a false sense of identity which leaves him

torn between the two extremes. It is because of his consistent association with the white lady that he ultimately comes to terms with his American identity though the urge to be there in his homeland remains there in his bones. He makes up his mind to make his life better by capitalizing on the opportunities afforded by America but at the same time he has inherent desire to find proper time to flee back to his mother land. The study suggests that identity crisis and the issue of assimilation are very much common among immigrants. However, since other factors or variables do contribute in the formation of diasporic experiences so it is not necessarily important that all the immigrants would undergo the same problems. The study also pinpoints that the forthcoming and accommodating individuals like Judith may bring ease for the immigrants.

## Bibliography

- Ages, A. (2008). *The diaspora dimension*. Michigan, United States: Nijhoff.
- Ashcroft, B. Griffiths, G. Tiffin, H. (2013). *Postcolonial studies: key concepts*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). Australia: Routledge.
- Bhaba, Homi, K. (1949). *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Habib, R. (2008). *Modern literary criticism and theory: a history*. Michigan, United States: Blackwell Publisher.
- Hage, G. (2021). *The diasporic condition: Ethnographic explorations of the Lebanese in the world*
- Holland, O. (2016). *Introducing literary criticism*. London, England: Icon Books Ltd.
- Ledent, B. (2015). Reconfiguring African Diaspora in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. *Research in African Literature* 46.4.
- Lingna Nafafé, J. (2022). *Lourenço da Silva Mendonça and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the 17th Century (Cambridge Studies on the African Diaspora)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manning, P. (2003). *The African diaspora: a history through culture*. United States: Columbia University Press.
- Mengestu, D. (2006). *The beautiful things that heaven bears*. New York, USA: Riverhead Books.
- McKee, A. (2003). *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Mpande, S.-M.N. (2021). *The Diaspora's Role in Africa: Transculturalism, Challenges, and Development* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351031660>
- Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: a journal of transnational studies*, 1(1), 83-99.
- Said, E. (2001). *Reflections on exile and other essays*. United States: GrantaBooks.
- Shepperson, G. (1998). *African Diaspora: Concept and Context in Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, edited by Joseph E. Harris.