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Precarious Identity, Displacement, and Belonging in Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the Lens of Afropolitanism

Partha Sarathi Mondal

Abstract: *Africans are no longer a stereotype of resistance to Western colonial oppression in the literature of African diasporic authors; instead, they can navigate the world with economic security and education. In Selasi's Ghana Must Go, the transcontinental migrations of the Sai family and in Bulawayo's We Need New Names, Darling's journey from a Zimbabwean shantytown to America, highlight how contemporary Africans can access a transcultural, globalized community while also illustrating their challenges in overcoming emotional crises, displacement, a sense of alienation, socioeconomic vulnerability, legal ambiguity, and strained community ties. By adopting cosmopolitan practices and transnational rhetoric, both novels share the Afropolitan ideal, a notion popularised by Selasi in her 2005 essay Bye-Bye-Babar. However, they diverge at one point: Bulawayo's work challenges the celebratory rhetoric of Afropolitanism by highlighting its protagonists' material and emotional struggles in coping with racial incompatibility and economic crisis, whereas Selasi's is a perfect example of Afropolitanism, showcasing its characters as economically privileged, educated, and elite. Using Afropolitanism as the theoretical framework and adopting the Critical Discourse Analysis as the methodology, this paper will examine the intersectional points of cosmopolitan practices as well as their irreversible deviations in these two novels.*

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Diasporic, Africans, Afropolitanism, Race.

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Introduction

The ideology of African identity has been changing dramatically with more dimensions involving race, religion and ethnicity. African families are often multi-ethnic and multi-racial in the modern world, which makes them a hybridized structure in this kaleidoscopic social arrangement. High rates of locomotion, cross-culturalism, and migration have also significantly presupposed the creation of circumstances favourable to cultural hybridity. The cultural distances between people have been narrowed as various ethnic backgrounds, food customs and languages are becoming more intertwined. The study of Africans living in different places and societies reveals their motives, dreams, and experiences leading them to seek for another domestic environment. Migration, therefore, acts as a transpositional axis that expands the scopes of the Afro-diasporic literature, shaping the fluidity of African identity across the social, cultural, and geographical dimensions. Migration is the leading lens for understanding how transnationalism is constructed in *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names*, and its impulsive effect on characters. The eagerness with which the new wave of African immigrants in America and Europe is forming their identities creates a route for a new generation of contemporary African authors, who have been dubbed "Afropolitans". According to Selasi, Afropolitanism demystifies how transatlantic blacks negotiate their transition as the Africans of the world and identity formation as displayed in literary works (528). Selasi promotes the notion of Afropolitanism as a basis for interpreting the identity of Black who view themselves as part of the globe rather than as apart from it (528). Afropolitanism suggests that individuals of African ancestry are diverse and multi-coloured, encompassing a wide identity that defies categorization by nationality. This paper will explore how the hybrid identity in the context of *Ghana Must Go* by Taiye Selasi and *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo represents diasporic experiences based on instability and fragmentation. The study makes a comparative analysis of the cross-continental travels of the Sai family and Darling's journey from a slum in Zimbabwe to Detroit; the research explores how cultural hybridity is entangled with socio-economic precariousness and legal uncertainty as well as emotional detachment. The two novels demonstrate how the characters are determined to obtain cosmopolitan lifestyles and transnational dialogue despite the issues of lost community ties and financial failures. Such tensions show that Afropolitanism as pure positive process is an illusion, and re-define it as a field of negotiation, protest and perseverance. By contextualizing Afropolitanism as a state of unease rather than celebration, my paper aims to introduce a degree of nuance into the discussion on African diaspora and raise the question of ambivalence inherent in the concept of Afropolitanism and challenge the notion of belonging and identity. To do this, my study will employ Afropolitanism as the guiding framework and the Critical Discourse Analysis as the methodology, to discourse how Selasi and Bulawayo interrogate the promises and paradoxes of transnational African identities.

Redefining Afropolitanism: Towards a Pluralist Literary Framework

The African novel has undergone a lot of changes: the themes pertaining to colonialism, postcolonialism, and cultural nationalism are superseded by the themes of ecology, post-nationalism, Afropolitanism,

Africanfuturism, text stylistics, and the new African diaspora. This owes to a transnational turn in literary practices effected by the globalisation that has erased both geographical and cultural distinctions and ushered in the cultural fusion between the contemporary diasporic Africans and their host society's cultures. This transnational and cross-cultural phenomenon involves designating a new African identity what Taiye Selasi calls the Afropolitan identity or Afropolitanism.

The word "Afropolitan" first came into vogue by Gevisser and Nuttall (Anasiudu 3). It then extends to conceptualise the re-Africanisation of Africa and its people. Selasi exploited the term to denote the cultural amalgamation between the culture she witnessed in London and African culture. Afropolitanism is also interpreted as an Africanised cosmopolitan culture marked by polyphonic Africanness, as it is formed by more than one cultural voice, root, and cultural dilution. It is also characterised by a social framework and spatial structure which are now decentred, and which goes in the direction of both the past and the future. Maximilian Feldner expounds the term "Afropolitan" as a combination of 'Africa' and 'cosmopolitan,' so it describes African cosmopolitans, a generation of young Africans who inhabit the metropolitan cities, speak several languages, are versed in multiple cultures, and constantly travel around the world (129). The term also connotes a class of intellectuals and professionals in attractive fields such as the media, creative and cultural production, politics, and venture capital, which stands in contrast to the parent generation whose members oriented themselves more along the lines of medicine, law, banking, or engineering. The concept of Afropolitanism is multifaceted and attempts to create some space between Africa and the utopian ideas of the continent as they have historically evolved in the Western world due to the transatlantic slave trade and, more recently, following the collapse of the postcolonial states in the second half of the twentieth century (Bordin 112).

In Selasi's arguments, Afropolitanism involves the notion of African transnationalism– a form of black agency and self-representation that purports to re-configure "what it means to be African" in the 21st century (528). However, despite the wide acceptance of Afropolitanism for its celebration of global African identities and its literary profusion, it has a number of limitations too. First, the African cosmopolitanism as the term implies has been questioned: the attempt to emphasize that Africans are the global citizens implies that they are not. The attempt as such is irrelevant in the sense that Americans or Europeans do not term themselves as Ameropolitans or Europolitans. Secondly, Africa as conceptualized by the Afropolitanism theory is invariably a sanitized image of the continent– the image of an Internet-friendly Africa. Third, the term often seems to be a metonymy of materialism and commodification, a fact substantiated by a glossy, lifestyle and fashion magazine named *The Afropolitan.*

Among various concerns what is most troubling about Afropolitanism is that it is often linked to social and economic privilege, mirroring the experiences of a select, elite group instead of a broad African identity. It is noted that Afropolitanism, in Selasi's theorization of the term, concentrates on the young, gifted, and elite Africans privileged with their education, economic stability, international orientations, and freedom to move across the world with choices of lucrative professions and fancy lifestyles. Taiye Selasi's own life is a perfect example of an Afropolitan. Born in London, raised in Boston by a Nigerian-Scottish mother and a Ghanaian

father, she has lived in different metropolitan cities including New Delhi, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Accra. By profession, she is a fashion icon, photographer, cybernaut, and prolific writer. Afropolitanism thus engages in the representation of the members of urban societies who possess symbolic capital and enjoy economic freedom while excluding a large number of African immigrants having no means and agency. Afropolitans may often come to be fortunate in living an international lifestyle but most of the African populations do not have that advantage as they face severe restrictions on transboundary movements since Western immigration policies and media bias serve to confine them to their continent.

Despite its limitations Afropolitanism is mostly praised with positive evaluations. The history of Africa itself is marked by mixing, blending, and interaction as migration and mobility have always been a noteworthy factor in Africa. What is crucial about Afropolitanism is that it, unlike postcolonial theory, repudiates any form of oppressor-oppressed binary and instead promotes a political awareness about the violence and oppression thrust on the continent by the law outside it. Rejecting the conventional postcolonial understanding of identity, it hails a more nuanced understanding of identity shaped by racial and cultural intermixing. Therefore, Afropolitanism has spawned both positive and negative responses– either as a symbol of exclusivity, privilege, elitism, and commodification or as an avenue toward a new Black identity beyond postcolonial discourse on victimhood. Selasi's essay *Bye Bye Babar* (2005) encompasses both perspectives, drawing them on with a particular irony and self-consciousness.

Reframing Transnational Experiences in *Ghana Must Go*

The main difficulty with people of correlative cultural affiliations is that they need to develop a sense of self-identity that is based on different social, cultural and historical factors whereas simultaneously being aware of their position in an in-between space (Princess & Olatunde 67). Selasi expounds how linguistic practices, cultural intermixture, and citizenship in different countries form the discourse of these identities; in addition, it becomes clear that, cultural blending is what forms the ontological base of transnational African subjectivity (Taylor 70). Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* seems to embody her theory of Afropolitanism by revealing it through fiction. The novel narrates the tale of a family, the members of a new African diaspora, who epitomize all the features of Afropolitanism. The story starts with the death of Kweku Sai, whose body was discovered in the lawn of his Ghanaian house. The narrative tells the stories of his large globe-spanning family and depicts him as a renowned physician at Boston Hospital through recollections from the final moments of his life. I Go, II Going, and III Gone are its three sections. The first section describes the past through flashbacks and the present by describing the causes and events of immigration and family separation. The first section mostly features Kweku Sai and his wife, Fola, who became the migrants of the first-generation. The second part deals with the lives of younger diasporas, referred to as the Afropolitans, the citizens of the world. The story depicts the agony that each member of the family experienced. The final section depicts their return to their homeland, Africa. It commemorates happiness and the reuniting of the entire family.

The lives of the characters and their small details depicted on the novel's canvas exemplify that Africans are growing their metropolises and possess exceptional talent and attributes that allow them to succeed in any profession. After immigrating to America, Kweku excelled as a surgeon at a famous hospital before he fell victim due to egregious racial injustice. A distraught surgeon left his wife and four children behind being fired from the hospital and dedicating his life and skills to his new home. His wife, Fola, chose to remain a devoted housewife and a loving mother to her children instead of pursuing her dream of becoming a lawyer. After Kweku left her, a broken and tormented Fola did everything in her power to provide a brighter future for all of her children, sending them off to pursue their studies and careers. She requested her oldest son, Olu, to bring the dispersed siblings back together after learning of Kweku's demise.

Each member of the Sai family has demonstrated extraordinary strength and talent. According to Selasi, there are numerous ways in which this new generation differs from the earlier ones. They are using their unique capacity to pay their ways with their own sense of blending. Olu, the eldest son, followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a progressive physician, and his support of his father's ambition demonstrates his affection and regard for Kweku. He was raised by the parents who had migrated from their native countries, and therefore, he combines African customs and culture with American ways of life. He once argued with his father and, in spite of his rage, he behaved appropriately: " ‘When you're talking to me, look at me.’" "‘I'd prefer not to.’" Olu clutched his bag's straps and peered down” (Selasi 88). This small conversation shows the conflict of power and silent defiance in the family context. The restrained reaction of Olu shows that he has internal struggle in which anger is suppressed and not expressed. Meanwhile, his gaze directed downward allows examining the sources of discomfort and a certain rejection of the absolute domination of the father. The moment gives an insight into the type of emotional distance that starts to develop in the household and predetermines further cracks in their relations.

Apart from to being gifted in their own unique ways, Taiwo and Kehinde are some sort of twins as having kindred minds. The twins "were extraordinarily good-looking." Taiwo has grown up to be a very attractive woman who consistently ranks first in her class. She became a lawyer and editor of the "Law Review" in spite of her mother's insistence. According to Selasi, Afropolitans believe in and pursue their ambitions, and they are more interested in non-traditional job prospects (529). Taiwo wishes her mother that she should separate her from her because she was severely impacted by the traumatic experiences of rape and sexual assault. The resumption of her relationship with her mother with whom she had a close bond as a child, was prompted by Kweku's demise.

After winning a Fulbright fellowship to go to Mali, Kehndie relocated to Paris and began his career as a waiter to support himself. He eventually became a talented artist whose artworks are sold in international auctions and exhibitions. Only he is aware of the cause of his father's abrupt and unexpected departure from the family. His paintings are a getaway from the trauma he once experienced from his father's decisions to protect his family.

The youngest and dearest child is Sadie and she has problems of identification and belonging. Her birth marked the turning point in the life of Kweku; he deserted her at a young age which made her feel estranged to him. She was accidentally called after her mother's name. Sadie, a young girl, who experiences bulimia, is not comfortable in the social and physical sense. Although she herself is a gifted dancer, she wants to be like Philae, her friend. The desire to be Philae is not based on a desire to be white because she envies Philae's cultural ease. Sadie's navigation toward self-acceptance can be said to begin when the family unites once more in Ghana.

In her essay *Bye Bye Babar* (2005), Selasi writes that Afropolitans are not a part of one geography, but rather feel at home in various places (528). She presents the epitome of cultures and languages mix, which not only has made the identity of this younger generation distinct but also so beautiful. The title of the novel *Ghana Must Go* draws its inspiration in the political upheavals of 1980s when the Ghanaians were driven out of Nigeria: it has happened several times involving Ghanaians. The blue and red check-patterned plastic bags were emblazoned with this phrase, which was common across Africa during that time period. In this essay, Selasi does not only discuss identity and cultural hybridity but also addresses such themes as ethnic diversity, geography, attire, and lifestyle as multilingual beings. The novel, from its title to every character, dialogue, and scene, embodies the core concept of Afropolitanism. Kweku embraces British and American cultures, but does not give up his African root, which is indicative of his ability to fit in. The narrative begins with Kweku in his African home having a British breakfast of croissants and drinking an expensive drink of coffee delivered by a domestic worker whom he greets using a British accent as he reads the newspaper. His second wife is busy in the morning activities of the swimming pool and their children are sleeping in the bedroom. This is a significant depiction of cultural assimilation, which indicates the dreams of Kweku as a diasporic father concerning his transnational children.

Selasi sheds light on how ethnic hybridity helps the emergence of unique and multiform identities in young Africans. In her characterization, Olu who is the eldest son possesses dark skin colour with a stout body, greatly resembling his mother who is of Yoruba lineage. The twins, Taiwo and Kehinde, present the traits of their Scottish grandmother, indicating that they are European. Sadie is the youngest of the Sai children and more aptly associates herself with her father; she has the same trait as him: black hair, blue eyes, and pronounced Native American characteristics harmoniously mixed. The different looks of the children add to a radiant proof of the intersection of different ancestral bloods and cultural backgrounds.

Although the Sai children have beautifully amalgamated identities, each of the children longs to fit the standard of beauty set by the white society. Their ethnically mixed looks seem to cause unease and questions in the social context of which they have become part. As an example, one would want to have straight hair and a more Eurocentric appearance whereas the youngest, Sadie would want to be a white person, to embody the pressure that they feel due to the demand from the host society. Such experiences of alienation support Selasi in propounding the term 'Afropolitans,' a word that reaffirms the value and attractiveness of cultural and racial

hybridity. With this term, Selasi promotes acceptance of diverse identity traits in a manner which rather promotes dignified expressions of selfhood instead of questioning the otherness of multiple identities.

Mirroring the cosmopolitan nature of her novel, Selasi uses Afropolitanism as an active process of global circulation and successful trans-cultural exchange. The writing organically mingles multicultural points of reference, contrasting imagery of the African coastline with that of wintry Boston and making mention of the Hollywood figure E.T. alongside the Yoruba notion of *ibeji*, implying twinship. Selasi's novel posits the literary combinatory references which stretch between continents and traditions including *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Afro-American writer Toni Morrison, sharing with them a commitment to highly textured, globally resonant aesthetics.

Precarious Transnational Experiences in *Ghana Must Go*

On the surface level of *Ghana Must Go*, there are numerous aspects that warrant the description of the novel as an Afropolitan novel. Behind this masquerade of unqualified Afropolitanism, though, a series of issues and contradictions is made evident and gradually unravelled in the tri-partite framework of the narrative. The initial section of the novel is based around the moment of Kwekus death, and he gives his own information regarding the happenings in the Sai family. The second section follows how the news of the death of Kweku disseminates within the family. In part three, the family is reunited in the home of Kweku in Ghana during his funeral. These conflicts, combined with cracks and fissures, which are evident in the psyche of characters, suggest that although the characters are successful in the exterior world, the diaspora and hybridity experience is not good in their lives. Fola sees that her children are in trouble as she sees them gathered at Kweku's burial: "One of six dead, the five left all unwell? For she feels this, she sees it, she knows they're not well" (Selasi 258). The observation shows a mother's emotional insight into the broken state of her family. During the burial, old tensions and wounds among the brothers and sisters are raised due to grief. It also signals that a physical reunion doesn't necessarily heal the psychological distances over time. Through such statement by Fola, the story depicts the consequences of separation, migration and loss on familial relationships.

The seemingly successful career life of Kweku is underscored by an internal instability and systemic vulnerability. So powerful is his obsession with the American Dream that he, driven by ambition and a sense of meritocracy, cares neither about himself nor does his wife prioritize personal and family interests. However, this dream is shattered when Kweku is unjustly fired as a surgeon not because he is incompetent but because of the host country's racial issues that make a scapegoat of him. His experience in Hopkin Hospital reveals how structural racism is deeply ingrained in the American institutions and how the meritocratic ideal is hollow for the Black professionals in the diaspora.

This instability highlights a pivotal mismatch of the Afropolitan identity: although it provides the model of international mobility and cultural competence, it does not secure agency and resistance to racialized exclusion. The downfall of Kweku is a symbol of the instability of African migrants who, regardless of their contribution and credentials, cannot be sure not to become othered in the cross-cultural environments. The

description of this experience by Selasi serves as a scathing indictment of the optimistic belief that cosmopolitanism can keep the migrant community safe against the issues of racial injustice. With the help of Kweku, she reveals the emotional and professional price of being a diaspora, shedding light on the instability of the feeling of being a legitimate participant in the world in which Africans are so often disproved of legitimacy and agency.

Conclusion

Contributing to the shift in the diasporic African writing, both *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* challenge the colonial-era portrayals through the promoting of the characters who are transnationally mobile, intellectual, and culturally diverse. In the case of Selasi, it is the privilege of the personal over the national identities, making second-generation migrants like the Sai children to be symbolic of a new African awareness. Their identities do not rely on the old cultural binaries but are formed as a result of deliberate decisions, emotional openness, and selective membership.

These characters oppose hierarchical concepts about culture, rather, they welcome a transnational ethos that is fluid and enables them to move across various worlds. Their in-betweenness turns out to be a form of creative agency as they are able to re-define Africanness not by denying their heritage, but by creatively re-imagining it in global situations. Selasi and Bulawayo do so to provide an identity that is both stratified, shifting, and self-written–a sensibility that is both multi-affirmative and rooted in emotional truth.

The celebratory air surrounding this form of transnational identity is restrained by the very complicated facts it covers. In *Ghana Must Go*, Selasi shows that even those characters who are privileged economically and have the freedom to travel around the globe are subjected to the unobtrusive but relentless pressures of racial conflict and xenophobic unease. Their high-status position is not much to protect them against the outsider gaze, reminding us that Afropolitanism is not what is seamlessly accepted. *We Need New Names* by Bulawayo sharpens this criticism, describing the process of migration not as a smooth move, but as a process that is emotionally turbulent, legally precarious and marred by racial conflict.

Afropolitanism, as it is portrayed in *Ghana Must Go* does not lend itself to easy celebration; it turns out to be a multi-dimensional and changing identity which is the product of privilege as well as vulnerability. This complexity was manifested by the Sai children who can be regarded as an example of transcultural identity and thus, Africa is no longer a marginal reflection of the West, but rather a subject of cultural dialogue in the world. Their lives are characterized by deliberate resistance to cultural hierarchies, and the adoption of multiplicity- an openness to hybrid belonging that rewrites the African identity on self-written, globally sensitive lines.

Nevertheless, this quest to transcultural selfhood is full of contradictions. The characters in this novel have to work through the emotional dissonance, divided allegiances, and the incessant stare of otherness. They do not have the feeling of belonging but create it, by imagination and introspection and strength. Selasi implies

that this form of transnational identity is not about the place but a process that requires constant negotiation between reminiscence and mobility, rootedness and reinvention.

Both novels, *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names*, successfully deconstruct the myth of effortless world citizenship. Though the cosmopolitan practices can be beneficial to the transnational networks and cultural capital, they expose migrants to the profound feelings of alienation and cultural displacement. It is not always empowering as the characters in these two novels show: at times it is destabilizing with its sense of unbelonging and its inability to bring together multiple cultural selves. In these novels, Selasi and Bulawayo present a dark commentary on the limits of Afropolitan optimism, anticipating the affective and existential cost of being a diaspora.

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