



THE CITY AS SITE OF IDENTITY CONTESTATION: A PSYCOGEOGRAPHIC READING OF HENRY AKUIBIRO'S *PRODIGALS IN PARADISE*

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Abstract: *This paper investigates how Henry Akuibiro's *Prodigals in Paradise* dramatise the psychological and emotional impact of geographical spaces on characters navigating mobility and urban transformation. It also explores how the authors engage with the city as a muse to explore crises in human relationships, identity and morality. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology in the analyses of some extrapolations from the texts, using psychogeography as its theoretical framework. These theoretical approaches enable an exploration of how spatial environments shape consciousness, behaviour, and social interaction, particularly within the complexities of postcolonial Nigerian urban centres. The paper reveals that the city space is portrayed as more than a setting, acting as a muse and affecting the characters' decisions, interactions and emotional state, while also reflecting on broader themes of spatial alienation, cultural dislocation and fragile negotiation of identity. It further reveals that the chaos that characterise the city fosters a unique resilience in its inhabitants, contributing to the ambivalent depiction of city life both as oppressive and enabling in contemporary Nigerian literature. The paper concludes that the city, as site of exploration in literature is not monolithic, but embodies diverse experiences.*

Introduction

The city experience in African literature has always played a pivotal role in shaping narratives and also providing a platform for interpreting human experiences. Cities, especially in Africa, serve as a microcosm of larger social, political and cultural realities, with many contemporary African writers turning to the city as both subject

and muse. Uwem Affiah, Offiong Amaku and Kufre Akpan echo this versatility of African writers in study of Nigerian drama, when they echo that "from its inception, Nigerian drama has always been a signpost for not only advertising its cultural milieu but also providing insights into its socio-political concerns" (64).

Treasure M. Inyang and Kufre A. Akpan



Unlike in classical African fiction, where the rural space situate narrative within a collective frame of reference, govern by communal rituals, stable values and secular sense of time, the city, as depicted in the contemporary African narrative conjures spaces for opportunity, alienation, identity contestation and ethical and moral crises, providing a robust backdrop for interrogating the complex relationships between individuals and their surroundings (Okpiliya and Akpan, 29). The shift is not only in the area of subject matter, but the form of storytelling itself: its rhythm, modes of character construction, multiplicity of voices, and temporal fragmentation. The above position validates Chimalum Nwankwo's argument that "the city serves as both a mirror and magnifying glass of societal values and dislocations" (98). Following Nwankwo above, it could be understood that in African literature, the city does not just shape individual lives, but becomes a character itself, reflecting broader socio-political and economic concerns.

Following rapid urbanisation across African continents, African cities, such as Lagos, have become dynamic spaces where identities are constantly produced, negotiated and contested. It embodies the contradictions and complexities of postcolonial experience, which often results in narratives of migration, displacements and a yearning for belonging (Akpan & Akpan, 30). Thus, different writers approach urban life from this perspective, exploring themes of alienation,

identity and survival. It is for this reason that Ogaga Ifowodo argues that "African writers frequently engage with the city as a symbol of personal and collective quests for meaning, identity and belonging" (56). In other words, the city has become a metaphorical battle ground for individuals struggling to negotiate their identities, amidst pressure of urban life. Chika Unigwe, in her interrogation of African urban spaces, further argues that "the city is often portrayed as a site of liberation, where individuals can redefine their roles outside the confines of rural traditions" (67). This intersection between the individual and the city highlights the city's role as a transformative space that disrupts fixed notion of identity and belonging.

As stated earlier in this paper, African cities are veritable avenues through which identity is constantly renegotiated. One of the major ways this happens is through cultural hybridity. Through internal and external migration, the urban and city centres converge people from different ethnic backgrounds with different cultural, religious and ethnic affiliations, forcing them to renegotiate their traditional identities and affiliations to accommodate the cosmopolitan influences that characterise the city. According to Ime Ikiddeh, "The whole history of man can be seen as visible and invisible record of his response to the continuous pull between what has been and what is and is likely to be...it is a catalogue of his existential and social



struggles to resist or adjust to the flux of changing conditions” (448). Kufre Akpan adds that “this manifests both at the individual and even, at the society’s level, leaving in its wake new ideas, values and condition of living” (1). It is therefore a common place to find individuals jettisoning their traditional way of life, in order to conform to the sophistication of the city.

The city and urban centres broaden individual’s access to employment opportunities, entrepreneurship, education and skills acquisition, which are driving forces of economic transformation and class mobility. People naturally expand the scope of self-perception, building new world-views and aspiration when they acquire education, skills and become economically empowered. This will lead to exposures to different kinds of cultures, lifestyle, life ideologies, and will consequently forge a hybrid identity that will interfere with the traditional values. For example, a young woman who migrates to the city to acquire university education may begin to develop new mannerisms that could server her affiliation with her rural roots, while negotiating a new urban identity. Chris Abani posits that “the city in African fiction becomes a space where characters must navigate the tension between tradition and modernity, and in doing so, confront their own fragmented identities” (175). Following Abani, the city, thus, serves as a site of existential crisis, where individuals struggle to reconcile their

personal ambitions with the demands of urban life.

However, identity reconfiguration is not only associated with upward mobility. Many urban dwellers struggle to find their feet many years, after they have landed in the city. Many of such resort to informal settlements, and in a bid to negotiate themselves out of poverty, they resort to casual and unstable jobs that are not socially recognised and devoid of security. Ugwanyi Maxwell argues that “human beings move to the extreme to ensure that their survival is achieved, even if it means giving it means giving up a certain uncomfortable location for another one which they perceive comfortable, little wonder it is not surprising to find people moving from one geographical location to another in order to fulfil their needs” (250). These conditions most often lead to formation of stigmatised identities associated with their socio-economic status or residential area. The situation mostly subject individuals to social exclusion and restricted social opportunities. Thus, African cities function as dynamic spaces where identity is continuously reshaped through both opportunity and adversity, reflecting the complex interplay between economic conditions and social self-definition.

Language also plays a crucial role in identity reconstruction in the city. The city is cosmopolitan in nature and characteristically attracts people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Thus, language acts as a medium



through which individuals navigate complex social hierarchies, negotiate belongings and undertake new social roles. As a melting pot of languages, the ability of an individual to reflect cosmopolitan influences in his speech and the ability to code-switch and code-mix enhances the chances of one's access to resources, social integration and boost positive self-perception. In some African cities, where English is dominant, proficiency in the language attracts prestige and determine quick integration. Thus, language becomes a badge through which professionalism, neighbourliness and community membership is solidified.

As stated in the abstract, this paper adopts Psychogeography as its theoretical anchor. The theory offers critical lenses through which urban spaces, both real and imagined, can be understood in relation to personal and collective experiences. It does not only emphasis the physical dimensions of the cities but also interrogate the psychological, social, and political implications of navigating urban environment. Thus, this paper will examine how their major tenets of Psychogeography anchors the thematic engagement of the city and identity configuration in the novels under interrogation.

Psychogeography is an interdisciplinary literary approach that examines the intersection by psychology, geographical environment and literature. Although the term was originally coined by Guy Debord to examine the emotional and psychological effects of urban environments

on individuals, it was popularized in the 50s by the situationist International Movement, which conceptualised unique account of advanced capitalism and whose primary concern was with the progressively increasing projection of human emotions and feelings.

Debord poignantly asserts that sychogeography is “the precise laws and specific effects of geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals” (6). Here, the surroundings and space count as inputs to process individuals' social identities, marks their psyche streams, behavior, modes and often results into their multiple social identities. Lofflers echoes Debord when he argues that: “the term combines psychology and geography in a way that describes spatial experiences in accordance with social, physical, historical, psychological and geographical dimensions of everyday life” (6). The implication of the argument above is that the city space is not merely a neutral or passive backdrops, but is actively involved in shaping human emotions, behaviours and desires and behaviours.

Psychogeography in literary studies shifts attention from plot alone to the affective and symbolic power of setting. This could be explained through Debord's concept of “derive”; a mode of deliberately wandering through the city without a predetermined destination, allowing the environment to detect the journey. In Debord's terms, *dérive* was intended to map



the "constant currents, fixed points and vortexes" that shape psychological navigation through cities (Downing, 6). Thus, the city in literature is no longer just a backdrop but an active force that produces meaning, often influencing narrative structure, tone, and character psychology.

This is where the core tenet of sychogeography lies, which is in the idea that the urban environment possesses a latent influence on individuals, subtly guiding their experiences and shaping their subjectivity. As a literary theory, psychogeography provides a framework for reading space as dynamic, affective, and ideologically charged. It reveals how texts transform cities into sites of emotional intensity, social critique, and imaginative possibility, thereby deepening the understanding of the relationship between environment, narrative, and identity

The City and Identity Construction in Henry Akubiro's *Prodigals in Paradise*

Akubuiro's *Prodigals in Paradise* is a compelling narrative, with chilling suspense, that interrogates the relationship between the city and human identity. Set in Lagos, South western Nigeria, the novel portrays Lagos city beyond just a geographical backdrop of the narrative, but as an active force that influences the lives, decisions and moral compass of the characters. It also serves as both the muse and antagonist, presenting opportunities, temptations and struggles that define the experiences of those

who reside there. Chimalum Nwankwo argues that the author "deftly captures the pulse of modern Nigeria, where the search meaning and success often leads to moral compromise and societal decay" (97). Nwankwo here implies that the author's depiction of Nigeria as a society where religious fervor and inordinate quest for materialism coexist uncomfortably reflects the realities of many postcolonial African nations facing rapid modernisation. David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan see the situation as relics of colonialism when they argue that "the throwbacks of postcolonial encounters continue to haunt contemporary experience" (341). It is also for this reason that Ananse Mbembe argues that "the African city is a microcosm of the postcolonial state, embodying both its potentials and dysfunctions" (94). Christina Agbo echoes Mbembe when she submits that "the city in Nigerian literature serves as a metaphor for the broader political and social realities of the nation, where hopes for progress are often dashed by corruption, inequality and instability" (108). To this extent, and from the above critical positions, the city becomes a lens through which the postcolonial African city is interrogated.

Through the experiences of some major characters such Nicodemus, Job, Keziah, Junior, Prophet Ahmed Elijah, and others who reside in the metaphorical and ironical uncompleted "Paradise," Akubuiro demonstrates that identity in the modern African city is fluid, unstable, and constantly reconstructed by economic hardship



and social realities. On his arrival in Lagos with lofty dreams and euphoria of securing a well-paid job, associated with many young Nigerian graduates, Nicodemus quickly realises that his hopes and expectations of Lagos as a place of limitless opportunities have been shattered. This is captured in the shock that prompts this rhetorical question “How could my cousin be living in a wretched place like this?” (22). The physical environment of ‘paradise’ where his uncle lives further heightens his disillusionment and marks a moment his romantic imagination of Lagos collapses. The physical environment is characterised by abandoned buildings, overcrowded streets, chaotic and noisy transport system, poor sanitation and insecurity simply throws up the contradiction and apprehension, and also mirrors the moral and psychological condition of the inhabitants. Thus, “Paradise” itself, becomes a metaphor and symbolic extension of the metropolis where survival overrides conventional morality. This informs Nwankwo’s argument that “the African city is a maze of contradictions, a place where modernity and tradition, wealth and poverty, hope and despair exist side by side” (65). This duality becomes very crucial in the conception of the city as both a place of hope and frustration.

One of the major concerns of this narrative is the author’s poignant depiction of the city as a site to renegotiate individual identity. Nicodemus enters Lagos with solid moral principles. His only hope lies in education as a doorway to

employment and social mobility. However, Lagos unveils situations that teach him otherwise. His initial idealism is quickly eroded as he confronts the city’s corruption and decay. He soon discovers that in the city, connection counts more than merit, while recruitment is characterised by nepotism. Lagos initially challenges him to maintain his moral principles, but also present the reality that such integrity is difficult to uphold in an environment where survival often depends on compromise.

His uncle Job, for instance, engages in stealing and perpetrating other anti-social activities in the guise of survival. His transformation as a simple rural migrant to a heartless survivor underscores the ability of the city to strip individuals of their idealism and innocence and compelled them into making morally-challenged choices. Job is portrayed in the novel as one who undergoes, perhaps, the most obvious and dramatic identity reconstruction. He abandons begging when he is almost lynched and re-invent himself as a miracle working pastor. This new-found identity is not constructed from the view point of divine pastoral calling but from economic and survival motivation. He converts his rat-infested room in “paradise” to a worship centre and serially exploits desperate worshippers seeking miracles. Here, the author deploys religion to critique how people manipulate faith in the city for personal gain. They commercialise religion and commoditise miracles in order to survive. Job’s new identity



illustrates how poverty induces performative identity.

Job and Prophet Ahmed Elijah becomes symbolic characters who represent various institutions responsible for shaping urban identity. Prophet Ahmed Elijah and Job represent religious opportunism, demonstrating how spiritual identities are commodified within the city. They reconstruct themselves as religious authorities because Lagos provides a large population of economically desperate people seeking hope through miracles. Their identities are therefore socially manufactured rather than spiritually authentic. Likewise, Edward Bolton's blind devotion illustrates how even foreigners may reconstruct their identities through religious fanaticism within the urban environment. These characters reveal that the city enables individuals to create alternative identities that exploit prevailing social anxieties. Keziah also becomes a sexual commodity in order to gain financial stability, while Junior, his delinquent son becomes Job's disciples, motivated by the potential financial rewards of working in the "Lord's vineyard". She is depicted as economically vulnerable and the only way out of this is her involvement in morally questionable relationships. Thus, the author locates her choices within the broader context of social urban deprivation, instead of simply depicting her as immoral. Her identity is characterised by social marginalisation, poverty, economic dependence, and gender inequality.

Her countless abortions, unstable relationships, and willingness to exchange her body for survival illustrate the devastating consequences of structural poverty. Her sexual desire contradicts what Okpiliya and Akpan consider as the primordial reason for sexual intercourse in some Africa communities. According to them, "The African men saw the women not as erotic symbol but as vessels through which offspring came forth" (3). Thus, a woman with these social and financial insecurity becomes more vulnerable, as no respectable options will left for her. Against this backdrop, her new identity becomes a survival mechanism, rather than an expression of personal values. Through Keziah, the author depicts the city as a force that exerts profound influence on personal identity. It possesses the ability to deconstruct inherited identities and reconstruct new ones, according to the demands of survival. Also, through the major characters and other occupants of "paradise", the novel demonstrates that identity is fluid and continually shaped by some social and economic factors in the city.

The characterisation of Junior reveals how urban identity reconstruction extends across generations. Raised within 'Paradise', Junior has little exposure to alternative social values outside the slum environment. His identity develops around violence, delinquency, and street culture because these constitute the dominant realities surrounding him. Akubuiro therefore presents identity as socially produced. Junior becomes a



product of Lagos, illustrating how children raised in deprived urban communities often inherit identities shaped by neglect, violence, and limited educational opportunities. His characterisation emphasises that the city reproduces itself through successive generations, creating cycles of marginalisation that are difficult to escape.

Akubuiro's rejection of rigid moral categories also helps in projecting the theme of identity construction in the text. Characters frequently move between virtue and vice, revealing that urban identity is unstable and constantly evolving. Job is fraudulent yet generous; Keziah is morally compromised yet deeply caring; Nicodemus is principled yet occasionally tempted by desperation. These contradictions emphasise that the city does not produce entirely good or entirely bad individuals. Instead, Lagos reconstructs identity by placing people in situations where ethical choices become increasingly difficult. The complexity of these characters reflects the moral ambiguity that characterises contemporary urban existence.

Language also become a site through which identity is projected in the novel. Akubuiro deploys this style to demonstrate the relationship between language and identity. His characters speak according to their educational background, profession, and social status. Educated individuals generally communicate in Standard English, while residents of Paradise frequently employ Nigerian Pidgin, street slang,

and indigenous expressions. This linguistic diversity reflects the multiplicity of identities existing within Lagos. More importantly, several characters switch between language varieties depending on their social environment, indicating that identity in the city is fluid and performative. Language becomes a means through which characters negotiate belonging, identity, and survival. By allowing characters to modify their speech according to circumstance, Akubuiro demonstrates that urban identity is continuously performative rather than permanently possessed.

Characterisation also allows Akubuiro to depict the city as a place where identity is closely connected to economic status. Every character's sense of self is influenced by employment, accommodation, income, and social mobility. Unemployment strips Nicodemus of confidence; poverty pushes Keziah into prostitution; economic desperation transforms Job into a false prophet. Conversely, those who acquire wealth or influence experience corresponding changes in social identity. The novel therefore projects that urban identity is largely determined by one's position within the city's economic hierarchy. Material success becomes a marker of recognition, while poverty leads to invisibility and social exclusion.

On the whole, characterisation in *Prodigals in Paradise* functions as a powerful stylistic device through which Henry Akubuiro constructs the city as a site of identity formation, negotiation,



and reconstruction. Every major character reflects a particular response to Lagos, illustrating that urban identity is neither fixed nor natural but continuously shaped by migration, poverty, religion, unemployment, crime, and social interaction. Through Nicodemus, Job, Keziah, Junior, and the numerous residents of Paradise, the novel demonstrates that the city possesses the power both to transform aspirations into resilience and erode moral certainty in the struggle for survival. Akubuiro therefore presents Lagos as an active force in human development, a city that continually creates new identities while simultaneously exposing the social and psychological costs of urban existence.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that the city occupies a significant place in contemporary African fiction as a space where identities are continually negotiated, challenged, and reconstructed. Rather than functioning merely as a physical setting, the urban environment serves as a dynamic social and cultural landscape that shapes individual consciousness, relationships, values, and aspirations. Through the experiences of diverse characters, it becomes evident that identity is not a fixed or predetermined construct but one that evolves in response to economic realities, social interactions, cultural diversity, and the demands of survival within the urban environment.

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The paper has further shown that characterisation is an indispensable stylistic device for representing these processes of identity reconstruction. By creating realistic, dynamic, and psychologically complex characters, the novelist effectively illustrates the ways in which urban experiences influence personal transformation. The interactions between characters and their environment reveal the reciprocal relationship between the city and identity formation, where individuals simultaneously shape and are shaped by the spaces they inhabit.

The paper has also identified the city as a contested yet productive space of identity formation, offering opportunities for self-reinvention while simultaneously exposing individuals to displacement, uncertainty, and moral challenges. This underscores the complexity of urban existence in contemporary African literature and reinforces the view that identity is fluid, relational, and constantly reconstructed through lived experience. Consequently, the study affirms that the representation of the city in contemporary African fiction extends beyond geographical description to become a critical lens through which issues of belonging, survival, social mobility, and human transformation are explored.

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