NEGOTIATING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN EXILE: A STUDY OF DINAW MENGESTU'S *CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION* AND *ALL OUR NAMES*

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DECLARATION

This research report is my original work and has not been presented for examination or the award of a degree at any University.

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DEDICATION

TO MY FAMILY

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This study examines how immigrant characters in Dinaw Mengestu's novels *Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names* negotiate cultural identity in foreign spaces. Mengestu as a contemporary African writer in the diaspora explores the experiences of African immigrants and their struggles to belong in new cultural spaces challenging the notions of fixity and stability of identity hence opening up new modes of considering cultural identity. Drawing upon the concepts of hybridity, third space in postcolonial theory, and cosmopolitanism, this study suggests that these novels show subject position and cultural identity as not fixed into definitive categorical distinction but as fluid concepts. Mengestu does not only praise possibilities of belonging beyond the confines of a nation or community but also present the cosmopolitan world where negotiation and belonging is difficult because of power differences, racism, marginalization and discrimination. The study also relies on narratology in analysing the narrative strategies employed in the novels in constructing these cultural identities and how the author articulates his message to the readers.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Questions of identity are a major concern for contemporary writers in the diaspora as witnessed in their fiction. These writers like Chimamanda Ngozi, Okey Ndibe, NoViolet Bulawayo among others explore the experiences of African Immigrants and their struggles to belong in the foreign land**.** These narratives are a major contribution to the understanding of issues of identity among African immigrants. Mukoma wa Ngugi argues for the incorporation of the new canon of literature written by African migrants in the African literary canon. According to Mukoma themes such as race, identity and tensions between African and African-American affecting first and second generation African immigrants are real and crucial matters being reflected in the fiction emanating from the diaspora (2015:1).

Dinaw Mengestu is an African immigrant writer and journalist in the U.S. He was born in Ethiopia, 1978 and later migrated to America only two years old to be with his father who left Ethiopia two years earlier because of the revolution. He has written three novels and non-fiction articles. The three novels are; *Children of the Revolution* (2007), *How to Read the Air* (2010) and *All our Names* (2013). His first novel was named a New York Notable Book and awarded the Guardian First Book Award and the Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction among other honours. His second novel was the winner of the 2011 Earnest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence.

Mengestu's novels narrate issues of violent uprooting, loss, identity and African immigrants' experiences in America. My study will focus on his two novels *Children of the Revolution*

(2007) and *All Our Names* (2013). *Children of the Revolution* focuses on the experiences of African immigrants in America, the life of the narrator, Sepha Stephanos who fled his country in the wake of Red terror attack that claimed his father seventeen years before, and his friends Joe from Congo and Kenneth from Kenya. *All Our Names* focuses on Isaac, who leaves his country Ethiopia to join university in Uganda. In Uganda he is drawn in to a revolutionary war in campus that later engulfs the whole country. In the wake of the killings during the revolution Isaac is given a chance to escape to America by his friend Isaac on a student visa. In America, he starts a passionate relationship with Helen a social worker assigned to take care of him.

Mengestu as an Ethiopian émigré in America has experienced the life of an African immigrant in America and the challenges he faced shapes his fiction. In an interview with Josephine Reed Mengestu opens up about what inspired his first novel, *The Children of the Revolution*. He reveals that his own experiences and that of his family moving from Ethiopia to America because of war, the death of his uncle and his experiences as an immigrant in America contributed to the events in the first novel (2014).

In studying Mengestu's selected novels, my focus is to explore how characters define and (re)construct their cultural identities across borders. Mengestu narrates issues of identity using themes of migration, loss, displacement and isolation. My study on cultural identities centres on the idea of national culture which according to Frantz Fanon (1967), "is the whole body of efforts made by people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (168). Stuart Hall (1996), states that cultural identity is formed through a person's membership of a national culture. This cultural identity gives one a national identity. "People are not only citizens of a [country but also] participate in the idea of nation as represented in the national culture" (611-12). National

culture is embodied in the nation hence an individual belongs to a culture by the similarities the individual has and the relationship one can draw between oneself and the nation.

Sara Mills in *Discourse* argues that discourse is produced within power relations and it structures the notion of identity (1997: 9-15). So national culture as a discourse is constructed and involves the idea of power and it claims to cultural unity which does not exist. Stuart Hall (1996) affirms that, "instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as constituting a discursive device which represents difference as unity or identity. They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and 'unified' only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power"(617). National culture encourages cultural domination by contesting another. It constructs a discourse where dominant culture speaks as the national culture while the cultural other is marginalized.

In examining the notions of identity and belonging in the contemporary world, cosmopolitanism has re-emerged as an alternative means of understanding forms of belonging that go beyond territorial boundaries. According to Vertovec and Cohen (2002), cosmopolitanism is a "middle-path alternative between ethnocentric nationalism and particularistic multiculturalism" (1). To them cosmopolitanism advocates for global citizenship and opens up possibilities for constructing transnational identity. Cosmopolitanism also challenges the traditional concepts of identity and belonging. Youna Kim in line with the same argument states that "cosmopolitanism assumes a shared [post-national] identity based on the universalistic norms of discourse, ethics beyond the boundaries and limitations of nation states" (2011:14). She argues that although cosmopolitanism is a redemptive space, it may work as a Eurocentric model because of the world's power structures of inequality that governs individuals' relations to others. In order to avoid such pitfalls, there is need to recognize the

powers at play that dictates openness in global interactions. It is through taking into account these imbalances in social relationships can cosmopolitan identity be possible.

It is within these hypotheses that my study interrogates how Mengestu's selected novels project the notion of cultural identity as a process and hybridity as an alternative means of identity and belonging beyond the confines of a nation or community. This study contests the notion of cultural identity as a fixed entity limited to geopolitical space instead urges for what Delanty calls as critical cosmopolitanism "multiple ways of existing in the social world … based on the principle of openness created out of encounter of the local and the global which considers the minority with their struggles in the global world" (2006:27).

My study is motivated by debates surrounding identity and diaspora in different academic disciplines. Theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Kwame Appiah to name but a few, explored new ways of interrogating diasporic identities because notions of nationalism or race as forms of belonging placed individuals in fixity of roots and origins. McLeod (2002), rightly observes that,

> nationalist discourses attempt to construct 'deep, horizontal comradeship' by setting 'norms and limits' for the nation's people in that even though individuals can gain access into a given [country] such 'norms and limits' can be used to exclude the migrants from being accommodated inside the *imaginative* borders of the nation. (212)

These discourses of nationalism, race or ethnicity are no longer suitable as models of identity and belonging in the present time because of increase in migration of people across nations

which has remarkably altered the way individuals think of their identity in the new places. Contemporary writers in diaspora have weighed in on this debate through their fiction by narrating experiences of characters within diaspora who face discrimination, marginalization and struggle between cultures and identity. These characters are also not accommodated within the imaginative borders of the nation. Through these narratives the writers contest the notion of identity as fixed and confined to geopolitical borders. A reading of these writings, either fiction or non-fiction confirms that the question of identity and belonging continues to raise important questions in different fields of study. In contribution to the same debate, it is worth investigating how Dinaw Mengestu, an African writer in diaspora presents problems of cultural identity and belonging in his novels *Children of the Revolution* and *All our Names*.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study focuses on how Mengestu explores the issues of negotiating cultural identities in his novels *Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names.* Stuart Hall (1990), presents two notions of viewing identity. The first notion is "cultural identity in terms of one shared culture a sort of collective one true 'self'…which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (223). This identity "provides us as 'one people' with stable unchanging… identity" (223). This notion of identity homogenizes people and gives them essentialist identities. The second notion Hall gives is "cultural identity as a matter of becoming as well as being which belongs to the future as much as to the past"(225). These culture identities "have histories but undergo constant transformation as they are subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power…identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (225). These "cultural identities are unstable points of identification made within the discourse of history and culture… not an essence but a

positioning" (226). This second notion presents cultural identity as a process and not something fixed. It keeps changing and is not limited to a geopolitical community.

This study draws attention to the fluid nature of cultural identity. The African immigrant characters in the selected novels being displaced from their native cultures in their homelands, encounter a new culture in the host community and these two cultures are always in contact. The characters have to negotiate between these two cultures influenced by the past and also the present. I am interested in exploring the ways in which characters define and (re)construct their cultural identities as some try to fit into socio-culture of the host community while others remain in the peripheral. The sense of loss, displacement, discrimination and isolation faced by the characters impact their identity. Through my analysis of the characters in the selected novels, I explore how cultural identities are constructed, reconstructed and transformed. My argument is that the physical displacement the characters undergo because of migration has a significant impact on their cultural identities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

My objectives in studying Mengestu's selected novels are:

i. To identity different forms of cultural identities in the selected novels
ii. To examine the effectiveness of narrative strategies in revealing cultural identities of the characters in the selected novels.

HYPOTHESES

My research is informed on the following assumptions:

i. Characters negotiate cultural identities in the selected novels.
ii. Narrative strategies are employed to reveal these cultural identities in the selected novels.

JUSTIFICATION

The question of identity is an important area of debate in different fields of study. This debate has intensified with globalization of the world today which has led to increased movement of people across the globe hence "dynamics and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are constantly changing, making society a category that can be analysed only as a process" (Delanty, 2006: 37). Having this in mind there is a need to rethink about the notion of identity. This study contributes to the debate on cultural identity in the context of immigrant literature.

My study is informed by the fact that Mengestu himself as an African immigrant in America has experienced identity struggles thus studying his novels *Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names* can give a different perspective on the debate on identity particularly cultural identity of African immigrants in America. Mengestu "straddles two cultures" which for Salman Rushdie "is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy [because] the distance, the long geographical perspective [provides him] with new angles at which to enter reality" (1991: 15). Mengestu as a migrant writer is in a privileged position to view the world as never pure or whole but fragmented and hybrid; notions he presents in his novels.

The African immigrant characters in the novels under study being uprooted from their cultural and ethnic origins struggle between their cultural roots and the new culture of the host community. The characters share certain aspects of displacement but differ in the way they perceive the displacement and how they deal with it. In examining the experiences of the African immigrant characters and how they negotiate cultural identities in exile my study hopes to be a significant contribution to scholarly debates on Mengestu's work and on cultural identity in African immigrant narratives.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

The study focuses on Dinaw Mengestu's novels *Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names*, analysing forms of cultural identities the characters present. It also examines the narrative strategies used in the selected novels to present these identities in the selected novels. The study limits itself in exploring cultural identity in the selected novels and will refer to other secondary materials that are relevant to my study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides a context for my study. The review touches on the author's works, identity and narrative strategies. This is to identify the gap I hope to fill and the existing study I hope to expand on. My literature review on *All Our Names* includes articles from newspapers and the internet because being a relatively new novel not much review has been done on it.

Malcolm Jones in his review of Mengestu's novel *All Our Names* states that issues of race, ethnicity and matters of origins are apparent in Mengestu's novels. But these are just his "raw materials" that he uses to present his major concerns; problems of identity, how borders and places play into issues of belonging, and human relationships (Jones, 2014). Jones' observations touch on my study as I examine how race, class and the past histories impact the cultural identity and adjustment of immigrants in a foreign land.

Commenting on the narrative structure, Michael Christie review of *All Our Names*, states "Spurring the story along is the tantalizing question of who, exactly, is this "Isaac" that Helen is getting involved with? The very same Isaac? Or is he, perhaps, the narrator of the other sections?…Due to this narrative ambiguity, naming — both in terms of identification and in

terms of a person's larger identity — assumes a brilliant thematic and practical importance as the story unfolds...." (2014).These insights on ambiguity of the identity of the narrator benefit my research on the narrative techniques employed by the author to present issues of identity. Christie goes on to comment on Mengestu's theme of naming and renaming sustained throughout the novel, arguing that it demonstrates the fluidity and malleability of identity, while questioning the possibility of complete personal reinvention or assimilation. This is helpful in my study on fluid nature of identity in Mengestu's novels.

Jonathan Cape in his review of *The Children of the Revolution* in the *Guardian* on 2nd June, 2007 argues that the narrator is "caught in the no man land between the worlds." This in-betweenness that Sepha suffers from offers "porous boundaries of travel between subject positions" (Ashcroft, 2010; 78). Cape goes on to argue that Sepha's friendship with Kenneth and Joe is the only sense of support he has in America. The three friends in the beginning were enchanted by the American dream but years later their dreams have faded and they no longer feel a sense of belonging in America (2007). Cape's comments on the African immigrants' experiences in America who get there in hope to achieve the American dream but their hopes and dreams become illusions as they are faced with discrimination and isolation because of their status as African immigrants. Their failure to fit into the mainstream society is because of their identities as immigrants thus they are always on the margins.

Julius Kanyiri (2013), examines memory as a marker of identity. He interrogates the effect of witnessing difficult experiences as well as not experiencing the same; arguing that "witnessing and remembering have a bearing to a person's identity" (70). His study explores how what characters remember and their testimonies are influenced by their identity and at the same time influence their identity (72). He concludes his study arguing that "memory dedicates on the

choices the characters make in their lives as well as the kind of lives they lead" (99). Kanyari also takes a gender perspective in his analysis of the impact of memory to the characters arguing that "though the women suffer most from the acts of violence they emerge victorious" (viii). My study on identity in Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* benefits from this analysis on memory as it is evident that the characters' identities are affected by their past but I also explore how class, race, influence the cultural identities in the novel. I seek to expand on memory by exploring how narration is done in the novel. The narrator employs memory in narration thus the narrative interrupts itself to bring an event or thought from the past. These interruptions make the narrative nonlinear and fragmented. I also seek to explore how this narration presents issues of identity in the novel. Lastly Kanyari's study takes a feminist perspective in analysing memory but my study does not take a gender perspective.

Nicole Cesare (2015), considers the principle of relation suggesting that "the novel brings narrative and mapping practices closer together" (112). To do this study she uses "Edouard Glissant's work on poetics of relation and David Harvey's conception of relation at space time arguing that the novel's fragmented and elliptical narrative embodies these principles"(114), hence the novel generate what she calls "dynamic cartography mode of writing space writing characterized by fluidity, mobility and disjunction" (114). She proposes that "the text deploys maps and other cartographic ephemera to negotiate and mediate geographical upheavals such as diaspora and gentrification" (113). According to Cesare, the relationship between "the spaces give the novel its cartographical interest [and] the relationship between the characters drive its plot and attest to Sepha's psychological as well as geographical dislocation" (116). Cesare argues that the nonlinear story telling "which takes detours through Sepha's memories and then circles back and picks up the narrative thought line makes it a temporally relation as well as with the overlapping and fragmented timelines serve as a corollary to the overlapping

and fragmented spaces in the novel" (117). Cesare concludes that the novel reveals "the inherent dynamism and disjunction of contemporary spaces and in so doing demonstrates of the form of the novel itself becomes dynamic as it represents such space" (134). Cesare's insights on the novel's fragmented and elliptical narrative shades light on the structure and narration of the novel. This will benefit my study on analysis of the narrative order employed in the novel and what this narrative order reveals about the identity

Victoria Cook (2004), in her analysis of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, explores the concept of identity as a "construct" and a "process" (1). She explores names and naming and their impact on issues of identification (1). She states that "the character Anil Tissera occupies a dislocated position in terms of her name, her nationality and her family" (3). According to Cook, identity and names are temporal and unstable concepts which keep changing making them fluid "cultural and ideological constructions" (3-4). Cook concludes that using the novel, the author challenges the idea of identity as being stable and static, espousing instead a position that considers identity as malleable. Cook's analysis of identities in *Anil's Ghost* contributes to my understanding of identity and names as a process of construction and not as fixed entities. Ondaatje foregrounds Anil's act of self-naming and the fact that she takes a masculine name she challenges the construction of gender making her gender multiple and fragmented. Though my study benefits from her insight on fluidity of names; my interest is not in construction of gender ambiguity but in construction of cultural identity which is not fixed to a particular place. A name can give an individual a sense of identity and convey race, gender and culture; but Mengestu through the character Isaac challenges the notion of name as a complete representation of a person's identity.

Hiral Macwam (2014), looks at the predicament of identity, name and belonging of the Indian immigrant characters of America. She explores the struggle for identity and belongingness of immigrants as presented in *The Namesake.* She argues that Lahiri's characters are trapped in a cultural uncertainty, enthusiastic about their new adoptive country but mourning the loss of their homeland. According to Macwan, "*Namesake* creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural differences in the space of diaspora" (47). For Lahiri names are symbols of identity. The title mirror Gogol Ganguli's struggles to identify with his unusual name" (47). These struggles drive "Gogol to reinvent himself by abandoning his name, Gogol and try to become someone else" (47). Adopting the name Nikhil he longs to be recognized as part of the American society which does not view him as an American though born and raised in America (48). He struggles with a "burden of two names in his quest to belong hence experiencing a feeling of being in-between" (48). Macwan argues that Lahiri uses Gogol's struggles with his name to symbolize the crisis of identity. He desires to relate himself to the American locale but his name hinders him being recognized as an American. Gogol growing in a hybrid culture; a "Bengali tradition in the house and American Culture outside the home sails the two boats but feels a sense of alienation in both cultures" (48). Macwan's analysis concludes that Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* illustrates the cultural dilemma that immigrants face in a foreign country. Macwan's analysis on cultural issues and struggle for identity among the first and second generation immigrants benefits my study as I seek to examine how characters in the selected novels negotiate their cultural identities in a foreign land.

Anita Sharma in her analysis of identity in the same novel *The Namesake* argues that through Gogol Jhumpa Lahiri problematizes the notion of identity exploring whether identity is determined by a name. Sharma argues that through Gogol, Lahiri shows that names only don't

ascertain identity; cultural hybridity has an effect on identity too (123). Sharma also argues that identity is not regulated by borders of nations either, as with changes of locations identity also changes (123). She argues that identity is not fixed and unified rather it is fluid and multiple (124). Anita Sharma's analysis of identity as flexible and changing in Lahiri's novel will deepen my understanding of identity in a process of construction and not determined by national boundaries. This is important as it focuses on my study about fluid nature of identity in the selected novels.

Nahreen Khan (2007), examines the concept of identity as explored in diasporic writing of three female writers. Khan argues that identity crisis is more "acute in the life of immigrants from developing countries to industrial societies as the economic, cultural and social divide between developing and developed countries is so wide that immigrants are placed in unusual fix. The immigrants can neither adopt nor return to their homeland" (7). In the three selected novels Khan does a comparative study to show that the response of immigrants to the adopted homeland varies among the "social class and between males and females" (3). Her analysis of the three novels reveals that responses of immigrants to tensions of assimilation are "personal, not communal and each individual define himself in the light of his own experience" (44). She argues that the three writers portray ethnicity as something "not static, permanent or pure but a result of interactions" (45). Her analysis shows the constant change of identity which is not permanent but transforms as a result of interactions. Khan's analysis shows how religion, class and gender impact ethnic identities of the characters in the selected novels. My study draws insights from Khan's observation on the nature of ethnic identity as she affirms that ethnic identity is not imprinted forever in the consciousness of a group as each individual defines himself in the light of his own experiences. However my study explores cultural identities in the selected novels by Dinaw Mengestu examining how each character constructs and

reconstructs his identity in light of the past experience. The past has an impact on the present state of the characters and how they define themselves.

Alexander Katie (2013), examines how in-betweenness affects Adichie's characters from Nigeria living in the U.S. Using a gender perspective, Katie analyses how men and women are portrayed in Adichie's short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (1). She argues that in her works, the female characters are portrayed as uneasy and troubled while the male characters are self-assured "happy hybrids" (2). Alexander goes on to argue that through her "female characters—anxious ex-patriates fumbling in their attempt to reconcile their two cultures, their dual identities—Adichie argues against the idea of happy hybrids giving a more realistic view of hybrid experience thus putting pressure on the idea of a blissful globalized and cosmopolitan world" (13). Alexander's study is insightful in relation to my study, for Mengestu's selected novels deal with the concept of hybridity. In her study Alexander compares the effect of hybridity on male and female characters; taking a gender perspective an aspect my study does not take as she argues for the re-examination of hybridity as optimistic and celebratory.

From the literature review it is evident that studies have be done on issues of identity in the context of immigrants in foreign lands. Mengestu's selected novels; *Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names* have not received much criticism concerning identity in immigrant narratives. This study hopes to fill the gap by analysing how Mengestu imagines, constructs and presents cultural identities in relation to the experience of exile, displacement and migration in the selected novels. Though Kanyari Julius has explored memory as a marker of identity, I intend to build on his study and also look at other forms of identity presented in the novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to examine cultural identity in the selected novels. To achieve my objectives I am guided by cultural studies which is an interdisciplinary field of study which examines how culture is constructed and transforms over time; and narratology which looks at the form of a narrative. My choice to use cultural studies to examine culture is that the theory assumes that many social and cultural characteristics are constructed by the society and the predominant culture influences the minority one(s) especially in the construction of cultural identity. Narratology as a theory of narratives will help me analyse the narrative strategies employed to construct these identities in the in selected novels. In cultural studies I will be guided by the views of Stuart Hall on issues of cultural identity in relation to migration and diaspora, and postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and third space will be of importance in my study. Gerard Genette's views on how to analyse narratives will guide my analysis of the narrative strategies in the selected novels.

Stuart Hall (1990), discusses cultural identity of diaspora black subjects arguing that "instead of thinking of identity as an already formed fact,…should instead think of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Hall views cultural identity as "becoming as well as 'being' arguing that it belongs to the future as much as to the past" (225). He argues that though "cultural identities have histories, they undergo constant transformation… [and] they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). Here Hall emphasizes the fluid nature of identity which keeps changing and never complete. Additionally Hall states that cultural identity should be viewed as the "unstable points of identification or suture which are made within the discourses of history and culture" (226). In explaining identity formation, he uses "Jacques Derrida's theory of difference" to show identity "as never fixed" (229). Derrida's

sense of “difference challenges the fixed binaries which stabilize meaning and representation showing meaning is never finished or complete” (229). Hall also views identity as based on hybridity which is the interfusing of identities. This makes identities not pure but the product of mixing and fusion. He argues that “diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). Stuart Hall’s concept of identity is significant in my analysis of the identity of the characters in the selected novels. My focus is to examine how migration, displacement and loss impact the cultural identities of the characters.

Homi Bhabha (1994), introduces the notion of hybridity. Hybrid identity is a process that emerges in liminal space where two cultures integrate. The integrating of cultures results to no pure culture because these cultures are always in contact with one another. Bhabha stresses that in our time “the question of culture is located in a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion”(1). He goes on to state that it is critical “to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (1). According to Bhabha “these ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”(1-2). Bhabha here explains the process of cultural negotiation where two opposing cultures clash and articulate their differences from each other. The in-between space is where the new cultural identity that is hybrid is created. This hybridity of cultural identities is not a product of assimilation of two cultures but a production of something new. Hybridity is a significant concept in my study and

is central to my analysis of cultural identities of characters in the selected novels of Dinaw Mengestu.

Peter Barry (2002), terms narratology as "the study of how narratives make meaning, and what basic mechanisms and procedures are common to all acts of story-telling" (222). Barry states that Gerard Genette "focuses not on the tale itself but how it is told, the processing of the tale itself" (231). He presents six aspects to consider in analysis of a narration based on the key areas identified by Genette. These aspects include: narrative mode, focalization, the narrator, narrative time, narrative order and narrating instance. In narrative instance, I examine narrative voice and narrative perspective to understand who is narrating and from whose perspective. In narrative time I examine order to understand how the events in the story are revealed to the reader and what that narrative order communicates about the present state of identity of the characters.

Understanding the difference between story and plot is essential to narratology. This distinction is made through narrative order. Barry defines story as the "actual sequence of events as they happen whereas plot is those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged and presented in what is recognized as a narrative" (22). For a story it has to start at the beginning and move chronologically but for plot it can start even in the middle, use flash back(what Genette refers to *analepsis*) to narrate what happened in the past and flash forward(*prolepsis*) to hint what is to happen later on. The novels under study employ flashback to fill in the past experiences of the characters which help evaluating the past in the light of the present situation. Use of flashback interrupts the present narration making the narrative nonlinear and sometimes the past and present seem to overlap. This is important in the analysis of identity of the African

immigrant characters because the past has a bearing on the present situation and how they relate with others.

The narrating instance is the convergence between narrative perspective (who perceives), narrative time (when speaking occurs), and narrative voice (who speaks). Narrative voice comes from the person telling the story.

Mieke Bal (1997), states that,

> The narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts. The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character. (19)

Bal's argument that the narrator is central in the analysis of a narrative text is useful in the analysis of the selected novels. The point of view of the narrator, that is from whose perspective do we perceive the events, the relationship of the narrator and the narrative –whether the narrator inside (homodiegetic) or outside the narrative (heterodiegetic). In my study my interest is in homodiegetic which according to Genette is when the "narrator is present as a character in the story he tells" (245). I examine how the narrator reveals the events; how he is implicated in the narrative and what the narration reveals about his identity.

Narratology is significant in my study as I examine the author's choice of narrative style in presentation of the characters' cultural identity and how he achieves his objective of communicating his message to the readers. These theories are suitable in my study and will enable me achieve my objectives.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs close textual reading of the novels in order to examine how the narrative discourse constructs cultural identities of the characters. The novels have some similarities as both deal with African immigrants' experiences in foreign land and their struggles to belong. Also in both texts the principal characters have painful past experiences which shapes how they deal with their present circumstances. Despite these similarities each novel treats the subject of cultural identity in a different way which opens scope for comparison; hence I engage in comparative textual analysis of the selected novels—*Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names*—with a purpose of identifying the cultural identities the characters adopt in the host community. In addition I examine the narrative strategies used in the selected novels to present these identities.

I also engage in critical reading of secondary texts on identity and narrative strategies in the context of immigrant narratives. My study is carried out within the theoretical framework of cultural studies, postcolonial theory and narratology. Cultural studies and postcolonial help me in identifying the cultural identities in the novels and narratology guides me in examining the narrative strategies employed in presenting these identities. I also consult the relevant literary critics on identity, immigration and narrative strategies.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Identity

Identity comes from the Latin word *idem* meaning 'the same'. According to Kathryn Woodward (1997), "identity marks the way in which we are the same as others who share that position and it marks the way in which we are different from those who do not" (1-2).

Dinesh Bhugra (2004), states that:

> A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-formed by how one construes oneself in the present, how one construed oneself in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future …. Racial, ethnic and cultural identities form part of one's identity. (135)

Identity is those characteristics that make an individual different and unique from others. From Woodward's perspective identity can mark sameness of those who share the same position like people of the same religion can be identified as same from the point of religion which they share though the individuals can be unique in their own way at a personal level.

National Culture

According to Stuart Hall (1996), national culture is "a discourse — a way of constructing meaning which influences and organizes both our action and our conception of ourselves" (613). My study approaches national culture as a concept constructed by social practices and within questions of power. National culture as a discursive product can be made, remade and reshaped in new imaginative ways. Hall further asserts that "national cultures construct identities by producing meaning about 'the nation' with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are instructed of it" (613). My focus is to examine how characters in the selected novels displaced from their native cultures negotiate their cultural identities in the host country. Through the characters, Mengestu contests the notion of culture identity as fixed and limited to geographical boundaries.

Exile

The word 'exile' implies "both a painful separation and progress" (McClennen, 2004:14). She also refers to exile as one who has been forced to leave one's country (14). Edward Said (2000), also describes exile in as an "unhealable rift forced … between the self and its true home" (173). From these definitions exile is seen as a situation of loss and pain. My use of exile in this study shows this sense of loss and pain as the major characters in the selected novels go through forced uprooting from their homeland because of war and experience sense of loss and pain in the host community.

Diaspora

Diaspora is a term that has contested definitions. Steven Vertovec (1997), outlines three ways of understanding the concept diaspora. Diaspora can be "*a social form, a type of consciousness* or *a mode of cultural production*" (emphasis original) (278). In my study, I use the term diaspora to refer to a type of consciousness as it describes sense of identity, experiences, and state of mind.

According to Iain Chambers Diaspora is a "drama of the stranger": "cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present" (1994:6). From this definition the concept diaspora has features of displacement, challenges of belonging—inclusion/exclusion, issues of identity, histories and a relationship with homeland. These aspects are relevant in my study.

Cosmopolitanism

According to Kwame Appiah (2006), the idea of cosmopolitanism was first coined from Cynics phrase "'citizens of the cosmos' [which signalled] a rejection of conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities" (2006: xiv). Its "origins were on moral view of the individual as having allegiances to the wider world" (Delanty: 2006, 26). The core tradition in contemporary cosmopolitan idea stems from Kant's work, *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795) that "propos[ed] a league of nations, [seeking] to extend republican political philosophy into a wider and essentially legal framework beyond the relatively limited modern republic. With this came the vision of a world political community extending beyond the community into which one is born or lives. Cosmopolitanism thus became linked with the universalism of modern western thought and with political designs aimed at world governance; … [it also] reflected the revolt of the individual against the closed world of particularistic attachment advocating for openness and universalistic orientation" (Delanty, 2006: 26).

This idea of cosmopolitanism has been criticized because it "configures the planet as a concentric world of national societies extending to global village; it is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance" (Bhabha, 2004: xiv). Pollock et al argue that "cosmopolitanism of the contemporary era "does not spring from the capitalized 'virtues' of Rationality, Universality, and Progress, nor is it embodied in the myth of the nation writ large in the figure of the citizen of the world; as cosmopolitans today are victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging" (2000:582).

Such arguments have called to the need to reconsider the celebratory notion of cosmopolitanism in relation to the minority groups because of its "overtones of urbanity and sophistication" (Ashcroft, 2009: 13), and free movement because it does not consider the power hierarchies in the global world. As Bill Ashcroft further argues "people who must move across borders, flee the nation either as economic or political refugees, or as subject oppressed in some way by the state power such people are undecidedly unfree" (13). This kind of cosmopolitanism involves "not so much excising one's local affiliations or rounding off one's personal repertory of identities with a final outer finish, as opening oneself up to a radical unlearning of all definitive modes of identification. It involves stepping out of a narrow, self-incarcerating tradition of belonging" (Schoene, 2009:21). Kwame Appiah terms this cosmopolitanism as 'partial cosmopolitanism' which does not "need to take sides neither with the nationalists who abandons all foreigners nor with the hard core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality" (2006: xvii). Cosmopolitanism is an important in my study as it argues for belonging that transcends national borders, anti-essentialist notions of identity and calls for willingness to engage with the other by stepping outside the definitive modes of belonging and identification.

American Dream

The phrase "American Dream" originated from Truslow Adams' book *The Epic of America (1931)* where he describes the American Dream as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement…a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (34).

William Clark states that American Dream is a "belief that there is a fair chance, the opportunities are there, and hard work will be rewarded" (2003:2). It is both a spiritual and material emphasizing on one hand a life that has "the noble ends of freedom and self-fulfilment [and on the other hand it includes specific] defining symbols: a house, a car and [abundance of] consumer goods" (Clark, 2003:5). It promises individuals on the ability to achieve both the spiritual and material aspects of the American dream unimpeded by authoritarian structure and in a society governed fairly.

I use American dream in this study both as a cultural narrative and as a concept built around the cosmopolitan ideals and ethics of human dignity, equality for all, democracy and recognition of individual irrespective of race and origin. The American dream with its promises of upward social mobility achieved through hard work appeals to the minority groups who seek to make a better life for themselves and belong. As narrated in *Children of the Revolution,* the promises of achieving social mobility, recognition and belonging in America are futile because the American dream proof elusive to them so when reality sets in the immigrants like Sepha, Joseph and Kenneth are left disillusioned.

First and second Immigrants

According to Somerville et al, "first generation immigrants are persons who have immigrated to the host country and did not have the country's citizenship at birth; [while] second generation immigrants are those born in the host country to at least one parent who is foreign born that is who is a first generation immigrant" (2009:3). Second generation immigrant can also refer to individuals born in the adoptive country by immigrant parents. In this study I use first generation immigrants to refer to the characters who were displaced from their homelands for both economic and political reasons.

CHAPTER TWO

DISPLACEMENT, (UN) BELONGING AND NARRATIVE ASPECTS IN DINAW MENGESTU'S *CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION*

In this chapter I examine identity issues and the experiences of African immigrant characters; Kenneth from Kenya, Sepha from Ethiopia, and Joseph from Congo in their quest to make a home, and hopes of achieving the American dream in Washington D.C. I also examine narrative strategies used to present the identity issues through their daily experiences. I use displacement to refer to the immigrants' migration (forced or voluntary) from their homelands and the term (un)belonging to indicate the negotiation of the African immigrant characters between how they are positioned by the dominant discourses of power such as race in the adoptive country and their own sense of belonging in the new cultural space. I employ the term (un)belonging in reference to Stuart Hall (1990), argument that "identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned and position ourselves within the narratives of the past [and these] identities are subject to 'play' of history, culture and power" (1990:225). In the novel the African immigrants have to negotiate their identity and belonging within the hegemonic structures of the adoptive country which determines who belongs and who does not.

Children of the Revolution narrates the life of Sepha Stephanos in Logan Circle for a span of eight months, his relationship with Judith a white lady who moves into Logan Circle with her biracial daughter, Naomi, bringing change to the quiet life that Sepha had before. The narrative also captures Sepha's friendship with Joseph and Kenneth, other African immigrants in

America; their day to day lives filled with hopelessness, isolation and spending their time together drinking and playing a game of coups and dictatorship in Africa.

Through the lived experiences of the African immigrants in the novel, Mengestu narrates the false promises of freedom and upward mobility that are inscribed in the American dream. To do so, he exposes the challenges and hardships faced by immigrants in a multicultural society. In the novel America is constructed as a space which restrains the mobilities and potentialities of cosmopolitanism. The African immigrants displaced from their homelands struggle to be recognized and be integrated in America but despite living there for almost two decades the immigrant characters remain strangers unaccepted and always on the margins in America. Disguised in its promises of freedom and equality for all as expressed in the idea of American dream; America instead is presented as alienating the African immigrants from achieving this American dream and belonging in the nation. Mengestu argues for multiple belonging across borders using African immigrants who are marginalized and alienated in their new cultural space.

Mengestu uses marginalized characters to articulate their daily experiences of discrimination and alienation in America; and the anxiety that comes with neither belonging here nor there to give a more realistic perspective of diasporic identity. Their counter-discourse highlights America as a society that does not give equal change and opportunity for the minorities to achieve social mobility and belong in the national culture. Susanne Gehrman (2016), argues that "mobility in a cosmopolitan tradition is the ability to move between and to inhabit different places and cultures … and this mobility more often than not a sign of a struggle of identity and not of a glamorous cosmopolitanism" (62-67). The immigrant characters' hope for making a

home and belonging in America proves difficult because of the society's racial and cultural hierarchies which excludes and marginalizes them.

In the novel Sepha observes that the America's idea of racial tolerance and equality is best portrayed in advertisement. This is in reference to the Virginia Community College advertisement with "four students- one white, one black, one Asian, one Hispanic with a school motto: Taking You to Where You Want To Be" (97-98). The American dream just like this liberal idea of America captured in the advertisement is paradoxical as lived experiences of the immigrants and their hopes to achieve mobility and belong remains only a dream. The discrimination they face, isolation and emptiness that mark their lives, remind them that they are the 'other'. The racialized power differences as seen in the novel determine those who have access to the promises of American prosperity and progress, and those despite their efforts at attaining the said mobility are barred from it. Mengestu critiques the impermeability of nation's cultural boundaries, arguing for America that considers the "otherness of others as both different and equal" (Beck, 2002:39), and one that "looks beyond the limits and flaws of multiculturalism which operates in terms of non-interferences between homogenously conceived cultural groups" (Bielsa, 2012:17).

Children of the Revolution is a first-person account of Sepha as the narrator and protagonist of his narrative. Mengestu gives a voice to the marginalized characters by using Sepha, one of the characters within the represented world to articulate the experiences of discrimination and un- belonging in America, hence challenging the dominant discourses on nationalism and race that keep some individuals from belonging within the borders of a nation. Sepha is an internal narrator-focalizer that is, he the one who sees and speaks in the story. Gerard Genette *Discourse: Essay in Method,* defines focalization as the restrictions imposed on the knowledge

provided by the narrator about the characters. He categorizes the concept into three types: "zero, internal, and external focalization based on the diminishing degree of access to the psychology of the characters" (Edmiston, 1939:729). Edmiston asserts that "zero focalization means that the narrator is unlimited spatially and unrestricted in psychological access to the characters. Internal focalization the narrator is limited spatially but has access to the mind of the focal character. External focalization has a spatial limitation, but this time the narrator has no psychological privilege and is limited to the role of the witness" (730). Having Sepha as an internal focalizer in his narrative give us direct access into his mind hence we get to feel his emotions, attitudes; see his vulnerability and strengths throughout the novels. For instance when Sepha narrates,

> I'm waiting to see if I can recall that emotion now-a silent, almost fearful awe that came when I first saw each building from a passing van, … there is no mystery left in any of those buildings for us, and at time I wonder how there ever could have been .... Left alone behind the counter, I was hit with the sudden terrible and frightening realization that everything I had cared for and loved was either lost or living on without me…what I had here was not a life, but a poorly constructed substitution made up of one uncle, two friends, a grim store, and a cheap apartment. (42-46)

From this passage, different attitudes and emotions are revealed about Sepha's life in America. Sepha narrating his own experiences, the self-looking back on his naiveté and optimism he had about success in America; but years later he realizes it was all an illusion because he has nothing to show about his life in America. From this reflection, we get to understand Sepha's doubts about the American dream of prosperity throughout his narrative.

As an internal focalizer, Sepha is located inside the represented world making his degree of perception limited. Because of the limitation of having the narrating I as a character on the level of the story, first person narration has received criticism from different critics. Lanser argues that "the first-person narrators are restricted to ordinary human limitations as they cannot occupy two places at the same time and cannot know what other characters are thinking but can only infer their thoughts or read their body language"(1981:161). Stanzel also argues that "all first-person narrators are biased by definition and are thus unsuitable as narrators" (1984:162).

Even though the above critics argue that the first person narration can be limiting, since it can only access the mind of one character, it has a great narrative force as Bran Nicol states, "autodiegetic narrator maintains a degree of autonomy not matched in other. While the reader is constantly aware that this surrogate author is a fictional creation, he also possesses independence quite unlike even the realistically drawn character in third text because every word of the narrative originates from him" (1996: 187). The I narration also makes "the reader feel it as a reality because by its very nature it can authenticate not merely its subject matter but also the means that subject matter is narrated" (Barker, 1993:4).

First person narration in this case autodiegetic narrator is significant in *Children of the Revolution* because it narrates experiences of marginalized African immigrants in America therefore by Mengestu making Sepha the narrator and character in his own narrative gives him a voice and agency to articulate his experiences and autonomy to challenge the ideology of American dream with its unreal promises, and contest the notion of identity as static. Because

first person narration is more intimate and personal makes the experiences narrated in the novel feel real and authentic.

While the story is presented from Sepha's point of view, Mengestu's technique of shifting backwards and forward, not only between present and past experiences of the characters, but also between past and present tense narration bring about plurality of perspective in presenting issues of cultural identity in relation to displacement and unbelonging. The events and narration in the novel shift between the present and past, some which go back to times in Ethiopia, and other fragments capture the first years of the characters in America. For instance, in the first chapter of the novel, the events take place in May after the departure of Judith and Naomi form Logan Circle. The next chapter takes us eight months back to September the previous year around the time Judith moves into Logan Circle. This moving back and forth in terms of space and time attests to the nonlinear progression of the narrative.

Genette (1980), examines this progression of narrative which he describes as the connection "between the temporal order of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative" (35). Narrative order is concerned with temporality in the novel; the relationship between ordering of occurrences in the story and their organization in the narrative discourse. The order can take either the chronological order where the narrative order follows a natural sequence of events; or it can take anachrony which deviates from the strict chronology of events in a story (Jahn, 2005). Genette defines anachrony as "the various types of discordance between the temporal orders of a story and narrative" (1980:40). These discordances are: prolepsis (flash forward), which is a narrative manipulation that evokes "in advance an event that will take place later," and analepsis (flashback) is an "evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point the story we are at in

any given moment" (1980:40). In *Children of the Revolution*, Mengestu manipulates the temporal order through analepsis, as the narrator digresses in his narration to recall events from the past which contribute to the understanding of the characters' present.

Mengestu uses dual narrative and flashbacks in the novel to contrast the past experiences of the characters with their present situation and to show how their past is still part of their present. As stated before, Sepha narrates about his life in Logan Circle, his relationship with Judith a white lady who moved into his neighbourhood and his life after the departure of Judith from Logan circle. His narration is done in two plotlines; one in present tense narrating events as they occur (simultaneous narration), and the other in retrospective, where the narrator tells events that have happened in some past time that is subsequent narration. The novel alternates between the past and the present as the narrator moves between these two temporal positions. This narration also tasks the reader to establish a connection between these two plotlines therefore the reader plays an active role in understanding the story.

The author uses the past tense narration in presenting the events that took place in the past giving Sepha the power and authority that comes with reflective narration. This sense of detachment from the events affords Sepha the power to interpret these events and make judgements about himself and others. This is evidenced when Sepha remembers how Kenneth came to own the rusty badly worn red Saab car that he drives. As Sepha offers, "buying that car was Kenneth's first entry into a long-awaited form of American commerce that I think he imagined would lift him above the fray" (10-11). He recalls the day three years ago, when Kenneth and him went to buy a car at a dealership in the Virginia suburb. Sepha describes the efforts Kenneth made to look presentable that day; he wore a suit and rent a car for the occasion. At the dealership, the two are not accorded any help from the American men working there

despite Sepha and Kenneth standing there for twenty minutes. The victory Kenneth and Sepha had hoped to achieve at the dealership never happens despite the efforts they made to be recognized by the American men. Sepha states;

> We pulled into the dealership cautiously, as if every minor gesture of ours were being judged. We got out of the car, and rather walk around the lot or enter the main office, Kenneth … resumed the pose he had taken in front of my house, except now … he put on a pair of sunglasses to complete the portrait. As we stood there and waited against the hood of the car, middle-aged American men…came in and out of the main office… and never once passed anything more than a brief, one-eyed glance in our direction. We waited ten and twenty minutes before we finally realized no one was coming to us, regardless of what we wore or how long we stood there. (12)

The treatment they receive at the dealership highlights the racial discrimination African immigrants like Sepha and Kenneth face in America. Because of their racialized identity as black minorities in America, Kenneth and Sepha are marked as a "sub-clan in systems of stratification which thwarts their integration and incorporation into the affairs of the host societies" (Arthur, 2010:5). Kenneth ends up buying a rusty worn out Saab. This is a true sign of how different the lived reality of the immigrants is from the dreams they had about life in America. Their experience reflects how even though immigrants gain entry into cultural spaces, the fixed dominant notions of identity exclude these immigrants from feeling welcome and being accepted as part of the host society. Sepha reflecting on this incident underscores his suspicion of the American dream of success and prosperity.

The difference between the myth of American dream and the lived reality is also evident through Sepha who barely makes enough money to support himself but feels the need to send money home to his family, although they don't need. He does that so as to live up to the idea of American success which he is expected to achieve yet he can hardly afford it. Ironically, as Sepha confesses last year during Christmas his mother sent him three hundred dollars which was more than the money he had ever sent home. This shows that family of Sepha back in Ethiopia has a better life than he has in America challenging the myth of American success.

Narrating retrospectively Sepha shares his own frustrations and disillusionment in his attempt to be part of the American nation through his relationship with a Judith, a white lady who moved next door to him in Logan Cirle. Sepha narrating this retrospectively gives him the power to reflect on why their relationship did not work and he now wishes he was wiser enough then not have expected too much in believing he could violate the fixed lines of race in America by having a romantic relationship with Judith. He reflectively describes his affiliation with Judith as a "case of mistaken identity" (80), because as he had forgotten his status as a poor immigrant in America with a dilapidated apartment and tumble down store; and foolishly "tried to recast [him] self as a man who dined casually on porcelain plates and chatted easily about Emerson and Tocqueville" (80).

Sepha now understands that he could not have measured up to Judith's position because of their race and class differences as highlighted in his insecurities and inadequacies as poor immigrant in America. Judith is a university professor with economic power to move and settle anyway as symbolized in her ability to renovate the old house to something magnificent. Her easy mobility and rich taste visibly contrasting to Sepha's stasis and shabby apartment in Logan Circle a reason for Sepha's low self -esteem as he confesses "all it would take was one

fleeting moment of skepticism on her end to confirm all my inadequacies, validate all my doubts, and send me running back to the corner I came from" (135).

Comparing himself with Judith's former husband and Naomi's father Ayad, an Economics professor from Mauritania, he realizes that he is someone he "could never stand against" (136). The comparison Sepha makes between Ayad and him highlights their differences and how the economic class influences who can access mobility and inclusion in the American society. It also contests the understanding of diaspora identity in singularity. Ayad is presented as a black man who can afford to move from place to place, from one country to the next teaching economics as a visiting professor in different countries. Sepha observes that if Judith was trying to substitute her child's father with another African then her choice was a poor one because he can never measure up to Ayad (136).

Even before Judith officially moved into Logan Circle, the dialogue between Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph after Sepha informed them of the possibility of white people moving next door to him shows the deep-rooted racism in America where a white moving to a black neighbourhood is not a situation they could envision. The racial hierarchies and discrimination the African immigrants face in America have psychologically affected them as reflected in their low self-esteem through the dialogue they have about Judith moving into Logan Circle. Kenneth and Joseph question Sepha why white persons would want to reside next to him. Sepha's response that is because they are not aware he lives there, illustrate the impracticability the three saw in such a scenario because of the racial hierarchies in their adoptive country that can never allow a rich white lady to live next to poor African immigrant like Sepha. Judith's decision to move to Logan Circle and even participate in the anti-eviction meeting was her chance to prove her ethical concerns, and her belief in freedom of participation and Democracy in

America oblivious to the fact her presence and her house symbolized the very evil of class and race the black community was fighting.

Sepha's relationship with Judith and his longing to have a romantic relationship with her indicates his desire to be accepted and belong in America. He begins to envision a new life for himself through his relationship to Judith and her daughter Naomi. For the first time Sepha showed enthusiasm in his life in America and was ready to take part in its Christmas culture in full signifying his inclusion into the nation. He offers,

> This year for the first time in many years I was going to make it something special… this year was going to be different. I was going to celebrate Christmas twice…I had something in America that I had never planned or thought I would have before: the beginning of a life. (152-154)

His happiness is short lived as his plans to spend Christmas with the two are frustrated when he finds a note from Judith informing him that they have left for Connecticut to celebrate Christmas with her family. Left alone, feeling dejected and frustrated Sepha is in need to feel a connection to a person so he seeks comfort in the hands of a prostitute that night. Sepha ends up spending Christmas night with Kenneth and Joseph laughing at their isolation, mocking one another until "the night faded into a blurry, indistinguishable memory" (180). This illustrates that no matter the different ways the three try to be part of America and belong, they always find themselves on the margins isolated from the adoptive country they wish to be a part of.

Mengestu's manipulation of temporal order through the use of flashbacks depicts the present disillusionment and frustration of the immigrant characters from their failed hopes and

dreams. Sepha digresses in his narration to recall the dreams and expectations of success the three had in their first years which were symbolized in the important cultural monuments of America—the Capitol, Washington Monument, White house and Lincoln Memorial—which they then regarded with "fearful awe" (46), but now have lost the mystery after reality settles in. In their earlier delusions of American dream; Joseph hoped to get a degree and later a PhD from Michigan University and Kenneth was to get his engineering, then a Masters and be part of American capitalism. For Sepha he didn't share in the immigrant dream of getting an education to offer him better chances in America because he knew as black immigrant this will never be the case. For Sepha, starting his own business—a convenience store at a poor black community area of Logan Circle—"signalled a departure from frustrating underpaying jobs, unrealized ambitions" (145), and finally a way to assert their identity by achieving the American dream and be part of the American economic success. The names they suggested for the store like "Logan's Market. A New Community Store" (143) also illustrated their desire to belong and to be part of larger society. But years later with nothing to show about their life in America; these same buildings are a constant reminder of their failed dreams and their otherness in America. The hyper inflated optimism and irrational hope they had about success and belonging in America can be compared to what Sepha finds troubling about spring. He states; spring comes with a "cautionary tale of overindulgence and inflated expectations that seems embedded in the grass and in the trees. I thought I had learned to keep those expectations in check, but it happens anyway, doesn't it? We forget who we are and where we came from, and in doing so, believe we are entitled to much more than we deserve" (44).

Just like the seasons, the life of the African immigrants in America move in circles. At one instance, they have it good and feel like they belong but moments later all their short-lived

hopes disappear. This is best illustrated in Joseph's failed dream of getting a PhD from the University of Michigan but years later he has nothing to show for all the time he has been in America other than a low paying job and old student notes which he continues to reread psychologically stuck in the time he took adult education classes at Georgetown campus. Joseph's attachment to his notes and his frequent visits to the library using his already expired student ID indicates his inability to accept the harsh reality of failed dreams. Because of their frustrations in America Joseph likens their experiences to Dante's "some of the beautiful things that heaven bears" (100), affirming it is only Africans who can comprehend that line because they live through hell every single day with "glimpses of heaven in between" (100). That line best captures the immigrants' experiences in America which they consider as heaven in the beginning but only come to realize through their daily experiences that it is 'hell' with peeks of hope for better life in between. Because of the failure to achieve their dreams, Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph show their resentment towards America with statements like "this country is like a little bastard child. You can't be angry when it doesn't give you what you want" (6).

The resentment Kenneth, Sepha and Joseph have towards America is also seen in the Ethiopian immigrants who live in isolation forming a small clan of Ethiopians in America. Robert Schreiter in his article "Cosmopolitanism, Hybrid Identities, and Religion" argues that, "multiculturalism leads to cultural enclaves with hardened boundaries that isolate themselves from surrounding cultures sharing the same social space. This isolation of individual cultures becomes breeding ground for resentment" (2011:27), because of the nation's lack of "willingness to engage with the other" (Hannerz, 1990:239).

Sepha observes that calling "the building insular" (115) is missing the point completely because, it is a twenty-eight story building, with twenty-six floors occupied solely by

Ethiopians. In the building there is a world entirely of their past lives and old relations transported wholly from Ethiopia. The Ethiopians in this building barely speak English. Their hallways smell of coffee, incense and *wat*. The children are only allowed to keep friendships approved by parents. The families that occupy this building run it like small villages with all relatives "living within shouting distance of one another" (116).

This building epitomizes Chielozona Eze's argument about immigrants who become "more fundamentalist or essentialist in their attitude to the world, when they leave their original native places, [so] they seek to preserve their roots or heritage, and, in most cases fall back on authenticity tropes" (2014:240). The Ethiopian immigrants in that building live in isolation so as to preserve their culture upholding their own culture totally ignoring the new culture in America. This desire to maintain cultural distinctiveness is one way the Ethiopian immigrants deal with their new position as immigrants and minority group in a large multicultural society. The occupants of this building gossip of the rise of infidelity, drug abuse, and unemployment which proof vanishing of their culture. Sepha's uncle, Berhane is one of the occupants of this building and through flashback we get to learn of his massive wealth he had back in Ethiopia but here in America he works as a taxi driver barely making enough money to save and send back home. This low paying jobs that the immigrants have to do echo San Juan's observation about capitalism in America that it "remains uncontested and globally universal because it protects those who already own the money and the power…while the reality of social and economic inequalities are fixed in place according to racial categories of labour" (2007:14).

Because of this miserable situation, they romanticize and glorify their homeland presenting their culture as ideal, resenting the American culture as the reason for their present sufferings because "time, distance, and nostalgia" (118) have persuaded them that their life back in

Ethiopia was perfect and all were morally upright. The Ethiopian immigrants hold on to their distant past and imagine they had a perfect world, with faithful husbands, obedient children and life was comfortable and ideal. Their position can be explained by the analogy that,

> Migrants, severed from his routes, often transplanted into a language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation; but many migrants, faced with sheer existential difficult of making such changes; and also often, with the sheer alienness and defensive hostility of the people amongst whom they find themselves, retreat from such questions behind the walls of the old culture they have both brought along and left behind. (Rushdie, 2002:82)

For the few immigrants like Kenneth who has managed to get educated hence does not do menial jobs unfortunately works for an exploitative boss who on Christmas day asks Kenneth to take one for the team and work the whole day entirely alone in the office. Through a dialogue among the three friends we get to understand why Kenneth has to work in such exploitative conditions as Kenneth recalls his childhood back in Kenya. Unlike Sepha's father who was a lawyer and Joseph's father who was a businessman; Kenneth's father was a poor uneducated man living in the slum. Because of his difficult childhood of being sent to the streets to beg money from white tourists, Kenneth expresses his ambivalent feelings towards his homeland. This explains the reason he has to work in whatever conditions so as not to end up like his father who only owned the picture of the president when he died. To Kenneth Africa and his father symbolize poverty so he has to work hard despite the exploitative conditions to succeed.

Kenneth tries to make up for the lack he had as child by internalizing the narrative of success and prosperity through accumulating material symbols of the American dream so as to belong. Sepha expresses his doubts about the liberal ideals of equality and possibility of achieving success in America which his friends Joseph and Kenneth are keen to achieve. He discloses that Joseph and Kenneth in their desire to belong and live the American dream now live in the suburbs in "fully carpeted apartments with hardly any furniture besides the oversize televisions they leave on even when they're not home" (10). Their decision to move to the suburb is so as to achieve the middle-class status a sign of achieving the American dream, but as their empty apartments clearly show they can hardly afford this lifestyle. Sepha further conveys his doubt about Kenneth's actions and efforts to be recognized. He states that Kenneth "believes in the power of a well-tailored suit to command the attention and respect of those who might otherwise give him a second thought" (2). He also imitates the manners and appearances of what he believes powerful American men like his boss embody with hope that in doing so he can feel and be important in a society he is considered a nobody. Joseph and Kenneth's endless efforts to belong are futile as their life at the suburbs is marked by loneliness and isolation as seen through the image of Kenneth "sitting on a frozen lawn chair laughing hysterically to himself [while] drinking beer" (145).

Kenneth's imitation of the whites' attitudes can be analysed using Lacanian psychoanalysis on lack and desire to be recognized by the big other. The big other in this context is the American society and its culture which has the power to determine who is seen and who is not. Kenneth's lack is his status as a black immigrant in America hence tries to identify with certain values and images that the dominant culture presents as valuable as an attempt to cover his lack. His imitation of these American attitudes indicates his unconscious need to be in a position which he can be seen and be recognized as part of the American society. As Sepha states:

> Every week he [Kenneth] says the same thing when he walks in. He knows there's no humour in it, but he's come to believe that American men are so successful because they say the same thing over and over again. Don't take from me, he said in his defence once. "Listen to them. Every day. The same thing. Every day my boss comes in and he says to me, 'You still fighting the good fight Kenneth?' (2).

The use of the present tense and adverbs that signal frequency, show Kenneth's actions as repetitious indicating that Kenneth believes that to belong one has to do the same thing repeatedly like imitating the dominant values of American success. For Kenneth to belong in America is a matter of persistent imitation of American values. His persistent imitation of what powerful men do is also evidenced in his weekly calls to Sepha to check if he is performing his duties as a shopkeeper like opening his convenience store early in the morning. Sepha remarks that their conversation ends with Kenneth hanging up abruptly because he believes this is what men in power do—dismiss people curtly and not give a second thought about their actions.

Just like Kenneth who has to work for his exploitative boss, Joseph too keeps his job at the Colonial Grill despite his hate he has developed for his work over the years. The optimism and pride he expressed the first time he took the job at 'The Colony'— "a premier eating establishment of the District's elite" (168); which was the best job he had held in America, an upgrade from a busboy and bellhop has dwindled after the illusion he had about the job faded away. Thinking his proximity to the powerful people in the city was an indication for a better life for him in the future he took pleasure in learning their names and spying on how they conducted their affairs. After a while his optimism waned into failed hopes of having a better life in America consequently seeking solace in his memories of Africa. Throughout the

narrative Joseph is obsessed with Africa; for him no one can understand anything better that an African. As Sepha offers,

> There was hardly a single thing in Joseph's life…that hadn't become a metaphor for Africa. From great lines of poetry to the angle of falling light on a spring afternoon…There wasn't a sport played in the world that couldn't be better grasped by the African mind. And as for politics, who understood its weight, capriciousness, and value better than the citizens of a continent devastated by coups and tyrannical old men? (100).

Because of their present frustrations and rejection by the nation they long to be accommodated into, Joseph turns to idealization of his homeland and people to supplant his present harsh realities. This typifies Salman Akhtar's argument that nostalgia helps immigrants to shield themselves against the hostility stemming from their present frustrations (1999:1).

Mengestu portrays Sepha as a character who does not share in the immigrant American dream of success because he did not come to America in search of a better life. He came to America "running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to [his] back" (41). Sepha is not bothered to make a better life for himself in America. This is affirmed by Nicole Cesare's argument that Sepha's attachment to the Logan Circle "functions as a metaphor for his nonconformity to the more acceptable immigrant narrative of upward mobility" (2015:114). Sepha reflects on his unresolved grief and melancholic state in the first few weeks of his arrival in America. His refusal to acknowledge his loss convinced him that he did not want anything from America because he believed his situation was only temporary and after a few months he will go back to Ethiopia; so, he spent most of his time and energy planning for the day he will eventually return home. He explains "how was I supposed to live in America when I had never

really left Ethiopia? I wasn't, I decided. I wasn't supposed to live here at all" (140). Living in denial, Sepha's first days in America were marked with loneliness and a lack of interest with anything that America had to offer.

> For the first three weeks, I was here in the apartment I didn't speak to a person besides my uncle, and even then our conversations were brief and strained. I rarely left the apartment, nor did I want to. Any connection, whether it was to a person, building, or time of day, would have been deceitful, and so I avoided making eye contact with people I didn't know, and tried to deny myself even the simplest pleasures. I refused to acknowledge the charm of a sunset or the pleasure of a summer afternoon. If possible, I would have denied myself the right to breathe another country's air, or walk on its ground. (140)

Years later, Sepha realizing his desire to go back home is not a reality anymore; he turns his mourning for a lost home to be part of his daily life. Sepha is seen to be "in search of this lost past" (Said, 2000:140); searching for his lost home, family everywhere in Washington, trying to look for familiarity in the new space. He lives in exilic state not free of his traumatic past, hence incapable of starting a new life in America.

> I was so busy passing my mother, brother, father, and friends in the aisles of grocery stores, in parks and restaurants that at times it hardly felt as if I had really left. I searched for familiarity wherever I went. I found it in the buildings and layout of the streets. I saw glimpses of home whenever I came across three or four roads that intersected at odd angles, in the squat glass office buildings caught in the sun's glare…my hallucinations of home became standard. I welcome them into my day completely. I talked to my mother from across the

> bus; I walked home with my father across the spare, treeless campus of my northern Virginia community college. (175-176)

He blames his inability to let go of his past life for his lack of ability to maintain structure and order. For him things begin "chronologically and dissolves into carelessness" because he could not get the "guiding principle" that placed his past in the right place (126), so that he can start his life "here and then move on point by point" (127). Even though the traumatic incident that he cannot let go happened in the past, Sepha narrates it in present tense blurring the distinction between the narrator and the protagonist. This "signal a move into his mind"—as an experiencing self at the moment of these events which emphasize the "mental presentness of the memory" in his here and now moment (Fludernik, 2003:125-126). This shows his lack to move past this traumatic incident by making sense of it. The close proximity between I narrator and I character evokes immediacy in the narrative calling upon "the reader to suspend the awareness of the author creating the perception that the narrative is an unfiltered account given by" the experiencing protagonist (Sandefur, 2003:60). Sepha acknowledges that he "can step in at any moment and see the house exactly as it looked that day, with the afternoon sun spilling in through the front window"(127). Mengestu recreates the scene as it happened that fateful day, slowing down the pace of the narrative by incorporating the dialogues and specific details from that day which show that even though this happened almost twenty years ago, the experience is still part of his present life which underscore his stasis and lack of continuity in America.

Sepha's inability to let go of this traumatic past makes him to move in circles in search of clues and signs that can help him understand his life in America in continuity and not as fragments. Sepha fails to make any or attachment or (re)attachment in America because of

this traumatic past. Since he cannot make meaning of his past and present, Sepha is caught in between in a state of neither here nor there which makes him feel detached from other Ethiopian immigrants in America, his family back in Ethiopia and those living in Logan circle. He confesses that he avoids restaurants and bars frequented by other Ethiopians, his calls home are infrequent, he eats *injera* only on special occasions, and he considers the "old emperor as a tyrant, not a god"(118). In Logan Circle during the eviction protests, Sepha feels that he is not one of "these people" hence his place is "behind the counter, not in the middle of a dispute in which [he] had no part to play" (192). Sepha fails to maintain any meaningful relationship in America because of the traumatic memory of his past and guilt of the role he played in his father's death. These memories mark Sepha's "discontinuous state of being" (Said, 2000:140), which manifests in his estrangement from the community that he lives in.

The sense of detachment that Sepha feels towards the black community in Logan Circle and the interaction between Sepha and Mrs. Davis represent Chuke-Sokei argument that the "relationship between the African immigrants and black Americans 'old' African diaspora mocks the transnational racial solidarity" (2014:68). He goes to state that contemporary writers like Mengestu "stress on these intra-racial differences in America to bring attention to the problem of lazily assuming ideological solidarity due to race" (70). Understanding diaspora identity in this singularity hinders the African immigrants from attaining individual identity and mobility because it essentializes all African immigrants into one racial identity even though they don't share same ideologies about what they want in America.

The only connection that Sepha tries to make in his seventeen years in America is with Judith and her daughter Naomi. Before meeting Judith Sepha's life at Logan Circle was marked with isolation because he was detached from the black community that lived there. The silence that

came with his isolation sometimes turned into a cocoon where the real world he lives began to wane into the past he had tried to forget. After the departure of Judith and Naomi from Logan Circle, Sepha goes through another painful loss that triggered the old wound of the traumatic and painful loss of his father and homeland he had experienced earlier during the red terror attack which he had tried to forget making Sepha to retreat to the life he had the first time he came to America; a life of purposelessness and inertia. To convey his stasis and hopelessness Mengestu uses the present tense which offers no possibility of translating the related events into meaningful experience because the narrator is caught in the present crisis that he cannot find continuity. As Emanuela Tegla argues "simultaneous narration can signal 'habitual present' which suggest; 'the stagnancy of its speaker's predicament" (13). This is illustrated by Sepha's narration of his daily routine of opening his convenience store,

> I lift the metal grates, and then tug down the white plastic blinds that block out all light until they spring back up. I turn on the lights and wait for their mechanical hum to fill the room. I make a general assessment. Shelves, windows, cash register are all in place. The ceiling remains, the tiles have held. (37)

This narration creates an image of the dull and monotonous life Sepha has after Judith and Naomi left Logan Circle. The enthusiasm he had before in opening his store waiting anxiously for Judith to come in and the lively moments he had shared with Naomi in the store reading together is disrupted after the two leave the neighbourhood. Their departure is another loss in his life a situation he has not adjusted to yet hence he carries on with life like a "somnambulists, [he] wake[s] to sleep and sleep[s] to wake" (35). Time and his life in Logan Circle do not make sense to Sepha anymore as he confesses, "there are already too many hours in the day; to worry about any one in particular is pointless" (35).

Suzanne Fleischman in "Towards A Theory of Tense-Aspect in Narrative Discourse" observes that unlike the case of past tense narration of "live now tell later" in the present tense narrative "the speaker verbalizes what they see as they see it [hence] the narrator has a lack of distance and a lack of objectivity derive[d] from the cognitive limitation inherent in trying to verbalize what one sees or experiences while it is happening" (1991:83). The conflating of the experiencing I and narrating I in present tense narration makes the narrator-reflector to describe experiences as he encounters them. This lack of distance is what brings about immediacy of events because it brings about "an increased feel … of the author speaking more closely" to the reader (Harvey, 2006:79). This "zoom-lens" draws the reader nearer to the events in the story. (2006:80-82). In addition to creating the effect of immediacy it makes the narrator live through the events as they happen because just like the reader the narrator doesn't know what happens next capturing the ambiguity and fluidity of identity as a process which keeps changing depending on day to day realities conveying the complexities of self-identity because the narrator relating events as the characters experience them depict characters in the course of "dealing with complex social and cultural realities" (Sandefur, 2003:60). Mengestu captures this through Sepha's present tense narration of their day to day experiences of isolation and discrimination in America.

As Dicinoski intimates, some critics have termed the present tense as "antinarrative" which is better "suited for description than narrative because it focuses on the now rather on the progressing the narrative" (2013:104). This antinarrative aspect of present tense narration present "may tend towards scene rather than summary hence giv[ing] closer and more detailed view of events, so that they appear to be unfolding in 'real' time before the reader" (104). The use of present tense in the novel creates scenes which allows the characters' dialogues and conversation into the narrative so that the characters can reveal their own experiences, thoughts

and feelings. It is through their routine end of the day drinks and dialogues that we get to learn of their fears of forgetting the past and how the past memories keep them attached to their homeland. Joseph highlights their fear observing that their "memories are like a river cut off from the ocean. With time, they will slowly dry out in the sun" (9). Kenneth too despite his hate towards his father and homeland because of the poverty and tough childhood, he expresses his fear of losing his memories after many years in America as shown in his inability to remember where the scar of his father was on his face.

> Sometimes I think it is here, on the left side of his face just underneath his eye. But then I say to myself, that's only because you were facing him, and so really, it was on the right side. But then I say no, that can't be. Because when I was a boy I sat on his shoulders and he would let me rub my hand over it. And so I sit on top of a table and place my legs around a chair and lean over and try to find where it would have been. Here. Or there. Here. Or there. (9-10)

To Kenneth, the father's scar reveals his nostalgic attachment to his past. Kenneth desires for a connection to his past homeland although he still longs to achieve the American dream and be part of the adoptive country. Despite earning enough money which Kenneth can use to fix his brown and bent teeth, he does not fix them because his teeth are a reminder of his past. He offers that one can never forget their past if they have ugly teeth as his.

Their need to hold to their memories and feel attached to their homeland is also symbolized in the old map that hangs in Sepha's store which although its borders and some names have been altered since it was made, the map still has nostalgic value that will never render it obsolete. The three use the map to play their game of coups and dictators in Africa which express their

ambivalence towards Africa. As Grinberg and Grinberg, argue in "Psychoanalytic perspectives on Migration", "familiar objects with emotional significance for the immigrant, which he brings with him, permit him to recognize his continuity with his own past" (1999:163). The map is also of unity and connection that the three shares in the pain of coups in Africa but it also highlights the different situations that contributed to the three coming to America which in turn show their own national particularities.

These memories also serve to help them deal with their present situations in America. In order to avoid confronting their present sad truths of unbelonging and unfulfilled dreams, the immigrants bring up past memories not to provide comfort but to "supplant the present with their own incorrigible truth" (60). As the narrator offers whenever they are out drinking inevitably their conversations always find their course home. The three friends use their memories as a cushion to their present emptiness and disillusionments. Sepha affirms this saying they "were always more comfortable with the world's tragedy than" (222), their own problems because it was part of the unending woe they picked so as to avoid their own frustrations and discontent with life. For instance to avoid further discussion on Judith abandoning Sepha to spend Christmas in Connecticut Sepha ushers in their favourite game about coups. For Sepha to escape his present reality of a miserable life in Logan Circle in his cheap apartment and furniture that he scavenged from trash he remembers a phrase from his father: "A man is not defined by his possessions but by the company he keeps" (60).

Narrative shift from the present to the past allows Sepha to describe his past life in Ethiopia and America which help the reader understand some of the choices he made. Through flashback the reader gets to understand why Sepha chose to move into Logan Circle, a place he now considers home, was because it reminded him of a park in Addis where he used to take late

afternoon walks with his father. The Logan Circle evokes both good and painful memories in Sepha's life which underscore his attachment to Logan Circle. The circle reminds him of the last walk he had with his father six months before he was killed; and it is a reminder of the start of the Red terror by Mengistu Haile Mariam that claimed his father and led to his dislocation to America. Sepha's attachment to Logan Circle reveals how his past still plays a significant role in his present life. He is still attached to his father and the painful past by choosing to live in a place that reminds him of his life in Ethiopia. Sepha's present relies on his past to make meaning. To him Washington has a resemblance in form with Addis Ababa. They "share a penchant for circular parks and long diagonal roads that meander and wind up in confusion along the edges" (173). He even admits that the evening light hits Washington D.C in a similar manner it hits Addis Ababa. Through his memories of Ethiopia, Sepha makes meaning of the present; he understands and appreciates the new spaces as home through their resemblance of his past home or the symbolic presentation they have with the past. His memories are the "glue that holds the past and the present together" (Agnew, 2005:19) which shapes his hybrid identity.

Some narrative shifts in the novel sometimes happen without indication that the narrator is recalling a past event which blurs present events with those in his memory indicating how the past is still very part of the present. In such situations in the narrative Sepha digresses from his present scene in America to Addis to narrate an event similar to an incident he is experiencing such that past and present, Addis and Washington overlap. For instance, at the scene at Dupont Circle he witnesses the parade of police motorcycles, cars massive black SUVs and limos bowing past with noisy sirens a sign of someone important passing. He quickly shifts to a similar situation he had witnessed in Ethiopia, the only difference being that the event back home took a long time because "the troops had to sweep the streets clean of beggars, cripples

and trash" before the emperor used the road (92). Sepha uses this contrast to expresses his criticism of the poor leadership of his homeland and the old emperor who he now considers "to have been tyrant, not a god" (118). This shows Sepha's identity in a process of negotiation between the past and present; this "temporal movement prevents his identity from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha, 1994:4).

Sepha sometimes remembers some supressed experiences and events as a young boy in Ethiopia which are triggered by a present experience in America which can be explained in relation to Cathy Caruth's "double wound." In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narration and History,* Caruth refers to trauma as "the wound of the mind an event [not yet] fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again" (1996:4). This idea is what she refers to as a double wound "a repeated infliction of a wound," (3) a "narrative of a belated experience" (7). This is illustrated in a bus ride to Silver Spring, Berhane's apartment, where Sepha digresses in his narration to reveal his life as a boy back in Addis when he was not allowed to ride buses. After school as he relates they were driven home either by the father of their guard. He compares the loneliness and emptiness that filled their quiet car with the crowded buses he saw pass by their car envying the passengers in those buses. When he got old enough he started taking rides in the same buses without his parents' knowledge. Sepha's narration moves from Ethiopia to his early days in America when he lived with his uncle describing how he spent his free Fridays and Saturdays moving from one full bus to the next because he felt securer on these buses than he ever did in anyplace in the city. This flashback contrast the privileged life Sepha had back in Ethiopia before the revolution and consequently his coming to America. It also highlights the loneliness he experienced in America brought by discrimination and his solitude in Ethiopia that came with privilege that as a young boy then could not fully grasp the implications of his experiences. But now years later he understands

how his lonely life in Ethiopia is similar to his alienation he faces in America. In both cases Sepha shows a need to be part of the wider society as expressed in his desire to ride in the buses crowded with other people. He states that those buses represented "benchmarks of civilization" (167). This could be because once in those crowded buses there was no discrimination, classes and all in the bus faced the same fate as him. Also it shows his desire for inclusion and belonging in the larger society.

Towards the end of the novel Sepha heads back to his apartment after retracing his life in America back to his Uncle's apartment in doing so he journeys back to Ethiopia recalling his past life and how all started. His journeying back was triggered by a letter he found in his convenience store informing him that he is to lose his business because of unpaid dues. Sepha's failing business and poor living standards typify the immigrant who remain in America despite the miserable life they have compared to the status of those they left behind.

> I send them money once every few months when I can afford to, even though I know they don't need it. I do it because I am in America, and because sending money home is supposed to be the consolation prize for not being home. For Christmas last year my mother sent me a money order worth three hundred dollars, more than all the money I had ever sent. (41)

In order to understand how he got to where he is presently, Sepha follows the old couple around the city in a search of "signs and clues" to make him understand his life in America as a whole and not in "fragments and pieces" (147). Through retracing his seventeen years in America Sepha gets to understand that it is time to let go of his traumatic past because he has "suspended and dangled long enough"(228). According to Adhib Khan, "recalling the past often maps the changes in identity and provides a referential framework for the understanding

of who [he] is and how [he] arrived at a particular point in the present" (2015:11). After retracing his life in America Sepha realizes that his father was right when he told him "a bird stuck between two branches gets bitten on both wings" (228). Sepha acknowledges that he has been "a man stuck between two worlds" (228). Though Sepha sees his returning to his apartment as going home, he still feels that it has a "sense of moving forward and backward at the same time [and] an understanding that what you're returning to can never be the same as what you left" (174). Though he considers Logan Circle as home he knows that it can never be the same as the one he left in Ethiopia. Walking back to his store he wonders why it took him seventeen years to understand that everything went with his father.

This chapter has examined cultural identity and belonging of the African immigrants in America. Through their experiences of discrimination and loneliness that come from feelings of not belonging in the adoptive new space, Mengestu offers a counter narrative against the dominant notion of America as a place for equality, democracy and inclusion. The African immigrants' failures to achieve their desired hopes and dreams; hence ability to reconstruct their identity and forge a new home in America shows the inequality within global structures that limit the minority groups to access mobility and achieve their potential across borders.

I have also examined the significance of aspects of narratology; namely narrative order, narrative voice, perspective and time in narration in narrating the experiences and identity struggles of the immigrant characters in the novel. Flashbacks in the novel are used as a technique to recall memories which establish continuity between the past and the present. In addition to this, flashbacks are employed to fill in earlier gaps in the narrative so as to provide information about characters in the narrative which helps the reader understand their present situation.

Simultaneous present tense in the novel is effective as it presents stasis of the immigrants in America and evokes immediacy of the events. This narration also eliminates any sort of interference and temporal gap consequently "has a height of objectivity as temporal interval between story and narrating disappears in total transparency of the narrative" (Onega and Landa, 1996:175). This manipulation and deliberate organization to create illusion of immediacy and spontaneity confers authenticity and credibility on the speaker and his vision and endorses his insight. This narration works well in Mengestu's novel so as to make Sepha's first person narration which is considered subjective and unreliable gain credibility.

My analysis shows that these narrative aspects like the use of flashback and first person internal focalization are significant in narrating issues of identity because the acts or remembering the past has an impact on the present and offers new understanding for the future.

CHAPTER THREE

ALIENATION, ESTRANGEMENT AND NARRATIVE ASPECTS IN *ALL OUR NAMES*

All Our Names captures the experiences of Isaac, (D—) with his friend Isaac in Uganda and later his relationship with Helen in America. Isaac's search for identity and place to belong starts as a young boy in his home in Ethiopia where he always felt like an outsider; always dreaming of leaving home, a dream he later fulfils when he leaves for Uganda. Estranged from his own family, in Uganda a place he imagined he could belong and call home; he finds himself always on the margins isolated as a foreigner and a poor boy from a small village in Ethiopia. The isolation and alienation that marks his life in Uganda is replicated in America, Laurel where he is racially discriminated because he is black. It is in Laurel that he meets Helen, a social worker with whom he later becomes romantically involved.

The chapters titled Isaac contain Isaac's narrative of his experience in Uganda while the alternating ones titled Helen have Helen's narrative where we get to learn of Isaac's life in America and her romantic relationship with him. Helen's narrative is significant in the novel as it offers an inside perspective of a white lady representing the misconception and stereotypes the white society has towards the blacks like Isaac which lay the foundation for racial discrimination. Her relationship with Isaac prompts her to look at the racial relations in her town differently and she even tries to challenge the existing bigotry.

Mengestu's work as a journalist has informed his fiction. As a journalist, Mengestu has reported from Uganda, Congo and Darfur and his coverage on civil and revolutionary wars has shaped his fiction. In an interview in Segundo Show Mengestu confirms this stating that,

> As a journalist, he has travelled to Uganda, Darfur and Congo. He has met insurgent leaders and has witnessed the effects of these minor and major conflicts and all have left an overwhelming effect in his mind. Hence, by the time he was writing his third novel, *All Our Names*, he knew and understood the consequences of these fights. So Mengestu "felt finally mature enough and able to create characters who were responsible for violence, who witnessed violence, who are perpetrators of violence, and yet at the same time are more than just violent men". (2014)

By alternating these chapters Mengestu juxtaposes the identity politics in Uganda and America highlighting the isolation that marks Isaac's life in Uganda and America. Mengestu also contrasts the "different forms of liberation materializing in different places in the world," in 1970's (Nance, 2014)— the optimism that came with gaining of independence for African countries (in this case Uganda), while in the United States there were hopes of a better America as "the civil rights movements and voting rights Acts had been passed" (Nance, 2014). Despite the optimism that these liberation movements promised nothing much changed for the day to day lives of the ordinary people as evidenced in the novel. The hopes and dreams that came with independence in Uganda proved futile as the leaders that took power were no better than the Englishmen who preceded them hence the country was soon engulfed in a revolutionary war. Although Isaac escapes the violence and alienation in Uganda, in America he faces another form of violence- racial discrimination and social divisions between the whites and the blacks. Isaac finds himself in unfamiliar, unfriendly spaces that discriminate and do not

recognize and show respect for difference which underscore the challenges of belonging across borders. Mengestu also contests the notion of singularity and fixity of identity through the leitmotif of names which complicate the possibility of a single marker to contain one's identity. In doing so, Mengestu shows that an individual's identity is much more layered and keeps changing.

In this chapter I employ the terms alienation and estrangement to refer to the immigrants' experiences of isolation as outsiders and racialized other in the host societies. Derek Hooks states that the term alienation accentuates a "feeling of eruption—estrangement in the relationship between the individual and things, objects and people around him or her" (2004:95). According to Jan Hadja, alienation is also an individual's sense of discomfort reflecting one's exclusion from the society's participation. It is an illustration of the individual's non-belonging, an uncomfortable awareness of feeling unwanted or not welcome in comparison to others (1961:756-757). These definitions capture Isaac's experiences of always being on the margins, excluded and unwelcome as a foreigner in Uganda and racialized other in America.

Mengestu employs a split narrative technique in the novel by using two narrators- Isaac who his real name we come to find out is "D—" and Helen; and manipulation of focalization to bring about plurality of perspectives in the novel. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983), recognizes the contribution of Gerard Genette to the understanding of the novel in his analysis and separation of the act of narration from perspective (71-72). The question of who speaks and who sees are important aspects to examine in order to understand perspective and the resulting effects in the novel. Rimmon-Kenan argues that "speaking and seeing, narration and focalization may, but need not be attributed to the same agent" (72). In first person retrospective

narrative like the novel under study "focalization and narration are separate" because of the temporal distance between the past experience and the narrating moment (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:72). Masayuki Nakao observes that "there is a tendency to conflate the narrating self with the experiencing self overlooking the distance between the two selves although expressed in the same first person pronoun I"(2011:1). The narrating I and experiencing I do not "share either the same knowledge or same space and time" (2011:1).

This distance between the two selves is what F.K Stanzel states brings about "the opposition between the narrating self and the experiencing self [and] consequently an existential bond between the narrative act and the experience. In such a continuum of the two selves there can be emphasis on either the I-narrator or I- character" (1984:212). Depending on where the emphasis lies events focalization can be done through the perception of the narrator self or through his perception as an experiencing self at the time the events happened. (Genette, 1980:10). Dan Shen (2003), argues that the co-existence of the retrospective and experiencing perspective in the first mode not only gives the narrator possibility of varying the angle and distance of vision but also enables the narrator to play on the two available modes of focalization. In some instances, the narrator can give a false impression of using one mode while implicitly shifting to the other mode to achieve certain effects (87).

Uri Margolin in his article "Where Do We Go From Here?" discusses narration in retrospective first person narration stating that "an individual narrator narrates events or situation in the narrated domain in which he acted as an observer or agent…such narrative involves current acts of recall whose content are earlier acts of witnessing or experiencing … in such a narrative the narrator can either recall or relieve the experiences. To recall is a distanced analytic retrospective summary which is not focalization… But recall may also be more like an attempt

to relive or re-experience, the original act of focalization with its resultant take, effecting the mental shift of deictic centre… [here] the narrator adopts the intradiegetic vision of himself then, presenting his own mental activity and view of others and himself at the moment of the event restrict[ing] himself to the experiencing self then with its deictic center" (2009:52-53). In some cases the narrator can be a focalizer too "when his object of attention is the current situation as a narrator; the specification and emphasis is on the narratorial sphere at the expense of the narrated, on the narrator's immediate context" (53).

Using Margolin analysis of mental shift of deictic centre focalization in first retrospective narration can be internal or external. According to Rimmon-Kenan "external focalization is felt to be close to the narrating agent" (76). The perception of the story is provided through the narrating self and not the experiencing self; while internal focalization is when representation of events is inside the represented world which take form of a "character focalizer", hence the perception is "character-bound" (76). Edmiston concurs with Rimmon-Kenan affirming that external and internal focalization can be used to "designate the vantage point of the narrating self and that of the experiencing self in terms of diegetic locus of perspective"(1989:738). As Edmiston states, in internal focalization the narrator places the focus in his experiencing self, the narrating self remains silent providing no corrections and withholds all subsequent knowledge. In external focalization, the narrator views events and characters from his present vantage point. Temporally he is unlimited because he knows what had transpired and can provide subsequent knowledge thus can intervene and manipulate the reader through discourse by providing evaluative commentary as well as corrective commentary (739). The temporal distance separating the I-narrator from the I-character makes the I-narrator "more mature or insightful than the earlier experiencing self as indicated by the fact that the narrator-focalizer can interpret, explain the earlier actions during the process of narrating them" (Tegla, 2016:5).

This temporal distance gives the narrating self ability to move up and down the temporal axis giving information in the future that is yet to happen.

Although the narrating self knows everything about the represented world, s/he can choose to reveal less than what s/he knows allowing the perspective of the experiencing self to dominate. The narrating self reports what happened "closely identifying with the past self betraying no manner of superior knowledge" what Dorrit Cohn describes as "consonant self-narration"; or the narrator can be "enlightened and knowing elucidating his mental confusions of earlier days presenting a wide disparity between the two selves" what she refers to as "dissonant self narration" (1978:143).

All Our Names employs both consonant and dissonant self narration. The novel has two narrators and their narrations are juxtaposed in alternating chapters titled Isaac and Helen. The use of two narrators as McCallum Robyn argues "is one way of representing a plurality of voices, [consciousness] and discourses [in the] narrative, of structuring a narrative as a dialogue between different cultural and ideological positions" (1999:63). Mengestu's use of two narrators—of different genders, in different cultural spaces— in alternating chapters present different perspectives on questions of identity and belonging in these two cultural spaces, Uganda and America.

The narrators tell events that happened in the past so the events are related by use of memory. In most cases memory is seen as disrupting the logical sequence instead presenting events selectively as the narrator remembers them. This is not the case with *All Our Names* as the novel adopts an ordered logical narration where incidents start from the beginning following a sequential order to the end which shows the recounted experiences have acquired the status of

"certainty or factivity"(Tegla, 2016:6). Mengestu employing such a narration that obliges the reader to follow the narrative of the narrators in a logical sequence indicates that he is concerned with allowing the self-narrators to make meaning of the events they experienced within the temporal process which shows authority in their narration, and allows the reader to make sense of how these events have changed the characters' ideological perspectives. Mengestu skilfully manipulates focalization in the novel which takes the reader through the character-narrator's private thoughts and feelings. This manipulation of focalization is seen in the tension between the naïve I- character and the enlightened I- narrator.

In the novel Isaac is portrayed as a permanent outsider as evidenced in his experiences back home in Ethiopia, Uganda and America. He feels alienated as much in his home as in Uganda and America. His sense of not belonging is underscored by the name 'Bird' his father used to call as a child because he thought his son "loved being high in the sky, far above everyone else" (179). The nickname alludes to the narrator's "wandering—[his] statelessness as a state of being" (Sacks, 2015). This is later evidenced in the novel by Helen who discloses that Isaac told him once he had accepted the idea that,

> There was no place in the world where he felt full at ease…I didn't know it was permanent, though. I thought eventually I would find a house or a street that seemed to have been made just for me. I think I have walked more miles than just about any man I know, and I have learned that if I were to walk every day for the rest of my life, I would never find such a place. (99)

The narrator seeks to establish and reconfigure his own identity away from his family and culture because at home he always felt estranged from his family, culture and what the community believed in:

> When I lived with my parents I used to take long walks by myself even when I was very young and was forbidden from doing so. I couldn't help it. I was restless. I always felt out of place. (99)

The narrator's estrangement in his home problematize the idea of home as a place where one belongs as Georgiou posits "home is the symbolic and real place that becomes a synonym to familiarity, intimacy, security and identity against the unknown, the distant and the large" (2006:85) Contrary to the notion of home holds as Georgiou states, the narrator felt like a "prisoner" (Mengestu, 2014:177) at home with all the traditions and customs that the community upholds. He stresses the sense of estrangement growing up in his village; dreaming about leaving and made plans to do so secretly.

When an opportunity to leave home came, the narrator knew where he wanted to go and that he wanted to be a renowned writer "in the heart of the continent's greatest city" (4). By the time he arrived in Kampala, Uganda he had given up all his names. His namelessness affords the narrator a chance to reinvent himself. Isaac's dissonant self narration discloses the guileless belief he had of making Kampala his home.

> From the beginning, it was harder for Isaac than for me to be in the capital. This had never been and, I understood later, would never be my home, regardless of what I imagined. (5)

He confesses how naïve he was in commit[ing] [him] self to thinking of [Kampala] only as "the capital …thinking as long as it was nameless, it had no allegiances. Like [him] it belonged to no one, and anyone could claim it" (4). So, Isaac thought he had a right to claim the capital as his home but he later realizes this could never be so no matter what he had imagined.

Through his shift from narrating self to experiencing self, the narrator reveals his vulnerability in Uganda and even around the only person that was his friend especially his first emotions when he meets him. He states "I felt hunted. I thought, "He's coming for me," and though I knew there was no physical injury at stake, I was right in assuming there was something at risk….I was a victim to his manoeuvres from the beginning" (8). Though the narrator expresses his helplessness with regard to Isaac's schemes, he still confesses that he felt safe and special whenever he was around Isaac and his friendship was all he had in Kampala. He explains that before he met Isaac, he had not made even a single friend. But after meeting Isaac the narrator confesses "for the first time since I came to the capital [Isaac] gave me the feeling there was a place at least one place I belonged" (8). This clearly shows the lonely and isolated life of the protagonist in Uganda with only Isaac as a friend who just like him lived a marginalized life in his country.

The narrating self comments on his feelings as an experiencing self using interior monologue. He states; "Isaac was gifted at making you feel special" (8), revealing how important Isaac was to him as a friend. Mieke Bal describes interior monologue as "an artificial mode of narration in first person with character-bound narrator that seeks to eliminate reference to the first-person voice in favour of a silent 'pure' first person focalizer" (1997:30). The 'you' here is used for self-address. Here the narrator discloses that although he is powerless around his friend Isaac with his "conspiratorial language" such as "we should talk in private of let's talk someplace else" (8) and with his eagerness to please him so he quickly nods in agreement to whatever he says; this made him feel special. His dependence on his friend Isaac grew with time that the narrator only felt safe, and could only sleep better in campus with Isaac around. The narrator confesses "those brief naps became the best sleep I got, because it was daytime and because I

knew Isaac was next to me and wouldn't leave unless I awoke"(61) … "I felt safe in that room, because Isaac was there" (83).

The narrator discloses that his friendship with Isaac was built on the understanding that "both were liars and frauds" (7); pretending to be students at the university so as to belong. Isaac just like the narrator arrived in the capital thinking he can easily find his place there because unlike the narrator Uganda was his country; but because he is a poor boy from the village he is marginalized too. Isaac's alienation is due to the society's social structure, where the difference between the privileged and non-privileged classes isolate the latter heightening their sense of not belonging. The narrator reveals how the two become friends underlining their alienation in the capital.

> Isaac and I become friends the way two stray dogs find themselves linked by treading the same path every day in search of food and companionship. We had taken up residence in the eastern quarters of the city, in the harder-to-reach-, hill-rich region prone to mudslide…A few days later after second meeting, however, I saw him on campus. We were trying our best to belong, standing near but never too close to a group of students… All we could see from the moment our eyes locked was the vaguely familiar, possibly hostile face staring back. Perhaps only two men meeting unexpected in the middle of a desert after having travelled for so long that they've begun to believe the world was uninhabited would know what we felt like. In the province of the slums we meant little to each other. Here we were everything. (6-7)

The description evidently demonstrates the isolated life the narrator and his friend Isaac had in Kampala. Because of their poverty, they only managed to get a place to stay in poor squatters

in marginalized slums away from the city. Seeing some familiarity in their alienated selves led to their friendship.

Their friendship blossomed over the games they played together in the university. They started off their game by identifying the two camps of students in the university— the real revolutionaries and the campus frauds. They categorized the two camps by looking at the shoes the students had on. The real revolutionaries were those "who fought to be here" and wore "dusty shoes that had been repaired so many times till there was hardly anything left of the sole" (25) while the campus frauds were the boys who came in "chauffeured cars"(24). At the start of their game the narrator didn't care about the difference between the two camps because for him there was another camp of outsiders like him who watched safely from the margins. He later realizes the importance of learning to see the difference between the two camps because he had imagined "in the university were better rules" (25) of equality and inclusion. It did not take long to see the students as "part of the same campus body but fractured into dozens of discrete parts that loosely connected but rarely touched" (25). The narrator's observation indicates that the politics of who belongs and who doesn't is not spared even in the university. The students who showed signs of wealth had privilege that "lifted their heads and focused their eyes" (25) which could not be said of the likes of Isaac and the narrator who try their best to be part of the students but are still marginalized.

Through the game they play, Mengestu presents the social divisions in the city, depicting the disparity between the rich and the poor as seen in the image of shoes. The foreigners like the narrator and the poor like his friend Isaac lack a sense of belonging in Uganda because the country recognizes those who have economic strength which can give them access to power

and entitlement. This also highlights the disappointment of the hopes and dreams of Kampala as a city one can claim as home for the ordinary individuals like the narrator and Isaac.

This disillusionment is further emphasized in the paper revolution of "Crimes Against the Country" (29), the two start later claiming unlike the other radical camps theirs is "a true democracy' because "the paper revolution is for everyone"(56). Isaac and the narrator start their small war against the poor governance in the country not because they believed in that course but they had to do that to feel as part of the students and be recognized in the university. They disclose these sentiments in their celebration of paper revolution victory saying,

> The whole campus will know who we are. After that we will be famous. We felt that we were getting somewhere, that we were more than just idle spectators of campus life and more than just friends. (40)

Later on, after Isaac meets Joseph Mabira, who gives him small jobs, money and a place to sleep; he realizes that his revolution was over the moment he had clean clothes to wear daily, and enough food to eat each single day thus never went to bed hungry. Mengestu uses Isaac to represent the underclass living in misery and invisible in their own country. Because of their economic status in the country the underclass like Isaac have to use whatever means necessary to make a living, hence easily fall prey to the rich and powerful like Joseph Mabira who exploit their situation for political gains.

Other than his friendship with Isaac; the narrator's life in Uganda is marked with absolute isolation. No one notices him either at the university or the slum where he lived. The few months that followed after meeting Isaac, for the first time since coming to the capital; the narrator felt there is a place he belonged but after the incident at Café Flamingo where his friend Isaac is beaten by the chauffeured boys in campus; the narrator finds himself all alone

once again. Few weeks following the disappearance of Isaac the narrator's loneliness intensifies as he offers,

> Before Isaac, I had always been content to cast myself as an outsider, because only by such measures, I thought, *could you break from the grips of the family and tribe around which you were supposed to order your life.* I had ventured far away from home to live up to that idea without understanding that, inevitably, something had to be paid for it. Every day following Isaac's absence, I was reminded that without him I made no impact on no one. I was seen, and perhaps occasionally heard strictly by strangers, and always in passing. I was a much poorer man for this than I had ever thought. (emphasis mine) (46)

The narrator's reflective narration on his past decisions highlights a change of perception on the value of family and community. The narrator looks back at his naïve self and his decision of leaving, now fully understands his loss which at that time he had not yet grasped. The use of second person interior monologue (italicized) allows the narrator to distance and evaluate his actions as an experiencing self. The narrator conveys his pain of loss and alienation in Kampala. The narrator's need to belong and feel a connection with the society is underscored in one instance when a boy he mistook for Isaac waved at him; the narrator is elated that someone had actually noticed him that he stood there for more than one minute waving back at that boy.

Isaac's dramatic return to the university comes with heroic and popular moments for him and the narrator. For the first time the two are regarded as students in the university by other students who even join them in their paper revolution protest. The beating Isaac receives at

Cafe Flamingo earns him a place among other students who thought Isaac was beaten during the student protest in the university. Although the narrator and Isaac know the truth about what happened they don't reveal the circumstances that led to Isaac's injuries for fear of being alienated again if the students realized the two are not even bona fide campus students. The narrator confesses that those moments were some of the "most memorable moments of his life" (58). The fame they enjoyed in campus made them "only visitors in their real lives" of loneliness outside campus. (60) This life is short lived because the protests that start in campus at the beginning of the semester become violent and spreads to the rest of the country. The violence that engulfs the country and disappearance of persons who are deemed against the government intensify his fear of what may happen to him in the city. Mengestu highlights how as an outsider one is treated with suspicion making the immigrant to live in terror and fear. As a foreigner in Kampala the narrator is aware of his vulnerability because "it was always in times of trouble that those on the outside suffered most" (60). The narrator's anguish on what may befall him at the start of war in Uganda is emphasised through shift of narration to experiencing self at that moment; "I was terrified that someone would realize that if I was killed or disappeared, there would be no one to answer to" (60). During this chaotic period in the city the narrator finds refuge at the university and with his friend Isaac.

Despite the narrator's efforts to avoid trouble in the city; he finds himself in the midst of it after buying a newspaper with the portrait of the president at the front page. By closely identifying with the experiencing self the narrator emphasizes the fear and helplessness of outsiders like him in Uganda highlighting that as a foreigner one is always a marked other vulnerable to injustices and violence without a chance to express oneself. The narrator confesses that he was not neither aware of the politics in that neighbourhood nor of the recent disappearance of young men from that place. The narrator buying that newspaper was enough to tell the side he fell on.

He was not given a chance to explain why he bought that newspaper. The fears he had all along that as a foreigner in Kampala even though he disappeared no one will care about came true that day. The young men that came for him "lashed at him blindly and left him for the dead" (91). The narrator admits that the "memory of what happened after the paper was taken has never returned" and he "would do whatever was necessary to keep the buried" (90). But what he remembers whether he wants it or not is a "clear image of all those children walking and laughing as they stepped over [him] on their way home" (90). Isaac's decision not to remember that incident shows the extent of the violence he experienced and as he confesses "there is a coin sized circle in the back of my head where no hair will ever grow again along with three thin, distinct scar lines along the right side of my scalp"(90). To present the severity of this traumatic experience in the narrator's life; Mengestu shifts from past to present tense as the narrator visualizes the children walking over his injured body as if it is happening now. The scar on his body is a constant reminder of his physical and psychological trauma of the violence he experienced in Uganda.

Isaac understands that as a foreigner in Uganda the only genuine language he can get is violence. He expresses this sentiment when his only friend Isaac beats him up one time after he inquired why Joseph Mabira treats him [Isaac] special yet he is a poor boy from a little village. As the narrator relates, in response Isaac,

> Broke my nose with his elbow, spent several minutes after that drumming the right side of my face with his fist. I felt the pain; I didn't mind it…I didn't cry or ask him to stop… Another came over and kicked me playfully in the back and in the ribs. I didn't mind that either [because] for once, someone was speaking to me honestly. (186)

Mengestu depicts hopelessness of a cosmopolitan Uganda as illustrated through social divisions that marginalize some individuals, and the inter-clan killings that rock the country during the revolutionary war started by Joseph Mabira. The inter-clan killings show a divided nation where persons from one village are not welcome in another village as illustrated in the killing of refugees in the small village the narrator gets refuge during Joseph's war. The peace that prevailed in that village for the four days is interrupted when wounded refugees from other villages invade the village seeking refuge. All the men armed themselves ready to face the new arrivals. The narrator observes that the villagers could have threatened the refugees by firing once in their direction to tell them they were not welcomed there but that could not have "solved the problem of what to do with [them] if they eventually returned"(220). Their intention was to make them disappear forever so they fired into the crowd aiming to kill everyone and few that missed the bullet were "cut down with machetes and hoes" (221). Mengestu paints a horrific image of post-independent Uganda which does not value human life and show hospitality to others based on "oneness of humanity" and "obligations to others" who are not "related by ties of kith and kind"(Appiah, 2006: xiv-xv).

The narrator's presence in that village too is "not totally welcome" but because Isaac paid for his safety and for his stay there his presence is just "tolerated" (219). The anonymity and quietness the narrator enjoyed in the village the first days quickly wore off and every time the children shouted his given name—Daniel was a reminder of his "privileged perch" (219). The curious gazes from other villagers and the excitement from children shouting hello at him every day reminded him of status as an outsider in the village and sometimes as the narrator offers "I could the hear imaginary perch I lived on break" (220). Mengestu uses of the idea of the narrator's presence in the village as a perch to emphasize his sense of not belonging there but

just temporarily accepted underscoring the experiences of immigrants in host communities as never fully recognized as part of the new places they move to.

The narrator's friend, Isaac's self-less act of giving the narrator his student enables the narrator to travel to America under his name Isaac Mabira consequently escaping the war in Uganda. Isaac's act envisions what Kwame Gyeke espouses in his essay "Ethnicity, Identity and Nationhood" where he states that "humanity not our particular ethnic background should constitute our fundamental identity" as it is "the individual worth of dignity and respect not the ethnic group" (1997:103). In the novel Mengestu underscores that "friendship can be the basis of a deeper and more inclusive democracy as it is a relationship that goes beyond the proximity of familial, ethnic, or national relations" (Derrida, 1997: vii).

The theme of alienation manifests itself consistently in the novel as illustrated in the narrator's isolated life in Uganda which is juxtaposed with the racial discrimination he faces in Laurel town, America that excludes him from the society as a racialized figure. Laurel town is a hostile place which is divided along racial lines and openly frowns upon its races mixing. Mengestu uses the experiences of Isaac in Laurel and his romantic relationship with Helen, a white lady, to make a case against the racism and racial hierarchies constructed around racial stereotypes.

To present Isaac's experiences in America, Mengestu uses Helen's perspective which is important in the novel as it presents the view of an individual from within the centre not marginalized like Isaac. Her narration too portrays a different matured Isaac who is aware of the fact that he doesn't belong in this new place so he is ready to live quietly as possible; live as if he does not really exist and say little as possible which could be because of his traumatic past. Helen's narrative is consequently significant in filling and telling of Isaac's life in America

and how her encounter with Isaac made her realize the racial discrimination in her town which as she confesses she only noticed in extreme forms. Through the tensions between her experiencing self and narrating self the reader gets to appreciate the growth and changes in her view about identity with regard to race.

Racial stereotyping is apparent from the onset of Helen's narration. Helen as a dissonant narrator discloses the racial stereotypes she held about Africans as a naïve experiencing self revealing her ignorance and misconception about Africa and Africans. She states,

> My first thought when I saw Isaac was that he was taller and looked healthier than I expected. From there, I worked my way backward to two assumptions I wasn't aware of possessing: the first that Africans were short, and the second that even the ones who flew all the way to a small college town in the middle of America would probably show signs of illness or malnutrition. (13-14)

Helen's misinformed idea of Africans can be compared to Chimamanda Adichie's Talk about the pitfalls of having a single story of a place. She highlights how the west view Africa as a "single story of catastrophe" having problems of poverty, illness and famine; a notion Helen thought Isaac will hold true. Adichie goes on to argue that these single stories construct stereotypes that deprive people of self-worth and being recognized as equal to others by emphasizing how different rather than how similar they are (2009). The same argument is presented by Stuart Hall in his essay "The Spectacle of the Other" where he argues that "stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes difference" (1997:258) Mengestu clearly contests these stereotypes built on single stories by portraying Isaac, a character that goes against all the fixed stereotypes as illustrated in his capability to speak perfect English. Isaac although had never travelled outside Africa before, he constructs a cosmopolitan identity

through reading the works of Dickens which gave him an impression of how proper English should be spoken.

In the novel, Mengestu uses Isaac's interracial love affair with Helen to reveal the limits of cosmopolitan ideals of openness to otherness in America; where race is the power that differentiates, and classifies individuals deciding who belongs or does not belong. In Laurel town, race influences social relationship by fixing individuals in definite groups denying a person a chance of moving past these boundaries of race and engage with the other. The town's racist attitudes are captured in Helen's description:

> We weren't divided like the south and had nothing to do with any of the largest cities in the North. We were exactly what geography had made us middle of the road, never bitterly segregated, but with lines dividing black from white all over the town, whether in neighborhoods, churches, schools, or parks. We lived semi-peacefully apart, like a married couple in separate wings of a large house. (33)

Because of the racial prejudice in the town Isaac's relationship with Helen is exclusively in his apartment. Back in Uganda, Isaac had a fantasy of finding a foreign wife probably a doctor with blonde hair and blue eyes who will fall in love with him despite their racial and class differences. He imagined of them having a kind of love that frees an individual from the broken world. Here in Laurel Isaac gets to understand that such kind of love is not a possibility. Their relationship is a secluded reality that begins and ends in Isaac's apartment. They are also aware of how fast their small world they were gradually building could easily vanish if the outside world knew about their affair. I read Helen's sexual desire towards Isaac as a "mode of opening [her] self to the strangeness of the other [Isaac]; a risky movement of giving

up [her] identity and entering the strange territory of the other [thus] creating possibilities for dialogue" (Pucherova, 2009:932).

Helen longing to have her relationship with Isaac just like normal couples and have a chance to "go to the movies, dinner, invite friends over on the weekend, and have beach vacations" (32), made her single-handedly challenge racism in Laurel town. To start her small revolt, she invites Isaac out for lunch at Ben's diner. She describes the diner as "never officially segregated" although only whites ate there (35). Isaac and Helen walk into Ben's diner together and immediately "the whole diner fell silent as all eyes turned towards them" (36). In the midst of all the stares which confirm that Isaac has transgressed the fixed racial boundaries by stepping in Ben's diner; the waitress takes their order. The waiter comes back after a while asking them if they would like to take their food with them. Isaac realizing what is going on insists they will eat in the restaurant. The waitress brings Isaac's order first "served on a stack of thin paper plates barely large enough to hold the food [with] a plastic fork and knife wrapped in a palm-sized napkin" (38). Later on, when Helen's order is brought it is served on "standard cream-colored plates used for everyone other than Isaac" (38). Isaac is treated as an inferior being not worth of equal treatment as Helen because of his skin colour. I am pointing out here how race is used in Laurel town as a power that delineates individuals into who is superior and who is not, who belongs and who does not. Mengestu contests such racial prejudice arguing against forms of identity grounded in race that is used to justify forms of oppression and exclusion of some individuals based on their skin colour. The stares that Helen and Isaac get at Bill's diner are the same hostile glares they get when they stop for lunch at a restaurant off the highway on their journey to Chicago. The crowd at the restaurant "glare over their cups and from under the brims of their hats" (225) the moment they saw the two

enter the restaurant. The waitress who served them addressed both as “dear” and “honey” (225), an enacted affection to hide the obvious racism surrounding them.

Because of the hostility, the two face when seen together in public; Helen becomes more conscious of what might happen to Isaac if anyone sees them together. But even without anyone watching the two avoid body contact anywhere outside Isaac’s apartment. In one incident, Isaac grabs Helen’s arm trying to stop her as she is entering his apartment, her body recoils as both of them feel the breach. To cover up her unexpected reaction she lies to Isaac that he “just never knows who’s watching” (113). Ashamed of her actions Helen states “I wished that there were some way I could vanish or simply slip out of my skin, keep my flesh but without the exterior that came with it” (114). Helen’s wish emphasizes the politics of skin in America. Her wish to get out of her white skin but keep her flesh reveal that the problem is the skin that is “invested with meaning as a visual signifier of difference … [and] is also a border or boundary, supposedly containing the subject within a certain contour, keeping the subject inside and the other outside”(Ahmed, 2000:44-45).

Looking back at that incident she understands now that it “was a poor defence [as] no one was watching” but because of the persistent racism in America “[their] fears and prejudice were so ingrained deep enough that [they] didn’t need an audience to enforce them” (113). Shifting to interior monologue we get to learn of Helen’s inner conflicts as she reflects on incident between her and Isaac, she offers “what was worse [than] being alone in public and, for reasons you were reluctant to admit, feeling frightened because your lover held your arm” (113). This statement underscores the challenges of black-white interracial relationship in Laurel town. Helen thought the incident at Bill’s diner was the worst hurdle her relationship with Isaac could face but realizes that the prejudice is far deep-rooted that showing affection to each other in

public despite no one watching is impossible. Her admission of the politics of skin colour underlines the frivolity of racism asserting that in the inside Isaac and her are all human, and that skin is just that an exterior cover which should not deter her relationship with Isaac. Paul Gilroy (2000), argues against race which divides the humans and posits for recognition of humanity in order to achieve post racial humanism. He states,

> We are constantly informed that to share an identity is to be bonded on the most fundamental levels: national, `racial', ethnic, regional, and local. Identity is always bounded and particular. It marks out the divisions and subsets in our social lives and helps to define the boundaries between our uneven, local attempts to save the world. Nobody ever speaks of a human identity. (98)

Helen's close friends and workmates too are not left out in expressing their contempt about her close relations with Isaac as illustrated by David's statement which underline the persistent racism in Laurel. Helen's close association with Isaac exposes her to being labelled as an outcast in her own town.

> I heard you took him to lunch at Bill's. Denise and Sharon talked about it every minute you weren't in the office...What do you think would have happened if Denise knew you were having a relationship with Isaac?'... Denise would whisper to Sharon, and Sharon would tell her husband and her sister. You would come to the office and find them whispering, and after a few days, you'd begin to think that it was about you. After a week, you would start to think that people all over town were looking at you strangely...When Christmas came. You would have only half as many cards in your mailbox, and at least once a year, junior high boys would throw a half-dozen eggs at your window. (190-191)

David's statements coupled with the disdainful stares Helen and Isaac receive when seen together in public highlight the systemic racism in America where the immigrant others like Isaac are racially traumatized in the host society. Henry's advice to Isaac on how to live in America highlight the normalisation of racism in Laurel. Isaac states, "[Henry] told me not to stare at white people, to say 'sir' if I was stopped by the police, and to live as quietly as possible" (177). Isaac living as Henry's advised accepts his status as a racialized other and tries to avoid unnecessary attention to himself especially when with Helen. This is seen when Helen and Isaac take a drive to a hotel far away from their town. As they drive into the motel's parking lot Helen has no fear of anyone she knew seeing her with Isaac together, but Isaac "insisted on sliding to the bottom of the seat because even though [the people] don't know [Helen], they still might not like what they see" (150). Isaac's action shows his understanding of the racism in America and his position as a black man in such a society.

Mengestu uses Helen's relationship with Isaac to question the fixed racial stratification in America which portray the blacks as inferior. Helen's change of perception towards race is evidenced in her self-reflection, she looks back on her life in Laurel before meeting Isaac and remarks;

> I wonder whether before meeting Isaac I had tried to challenge the easy, small-time bigotry that was so common to our daily lives that I noticed it only in its extremes, I might have felt a little less shame that evening. It's possible that I might have been able to release some of it slowly over the years, like one of those pressure valves that let out enough steam on constant basis to keep the pipes from bursting. It's also equally possible that such relief is impossible, that, regardless of what we do, we are tied to all the prejudices in our country and the crimes that come with them. (115)

In her present reflective mood, Helen reassess race relations in Laurel town; she expresses regret on "all that time lost— not to have done more, but to have seen better" (100). Her relationship with Isaac opens her eyes to see beyond the racial prejudice in her town. The temporal gap between the narrating self and experiencing self is clearly seen in terms of ideology as presented in differing view on race and racial relations. The narrating self is more edified from her own experiences and her romantic relationship with Isaac. Helen's situation can be explained using Julia Kristeva's psychological theory of foreigner within national boundaries in her book *Strangers to Ourselves* where she states that:

> Living with the other, with the foreigner, confront us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply-humanistically-a matter of being able to accept the other but of *being in his place*, and this means *being able to accept the other* to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. (emphasis original) (1991:14)

Helen's relation with Isaac has made her more acceptable to the otherness of Isaac. At the beginning of her narration we get to see the erroneous view she had Africa and Africans, but throughout the narration in novel she evolves rejecting the fixity of identity in terms of racial categories by going against the status quo in her town.

Due to the racial discrimination that Isaac has to confront in America, his life in Laurel town is marked with loneliness. Isaac lives in a neighbourhood in the outskirts of the town in an apartment that lacks life. The only people Isaac can talk too are Helen and Henry. Isaac depends on Helen almost on everything and on one occasion he calls Helen at work asking her to put her phone on the desk, so that he could hear the voices of other people. Isaac's request exemplifies his isolation in Laurel. Helen also reveals Isaac did not have any idea on how to

make useful his long days. Although “he had books ... that he read obsessively because he didn’t what to do with all those empty long hours” (22). He also did not have the goodness or badness that came with one’s attachment to the past because he had done his best to escape it. His father, mother and siblings were strangers that he “felt a distant and detached affection that he could carry harmlessly” (103). Helen pities Isaac “for having nothing that was truly his” (22) as depicted in the novel Isaac has no place he belonged or called home, the only person he deeply cared for- Isaac in Uganda- died in the revolutionary war making him all alone in the world. Helen observes “being occasionally called “boy” or “nigger” didn’t compare to having no one who knew him before [coming to America], who could remind him, simply by being there that he was someone else entirely” (22). Helen’s statements underline Isaac’s estrangement and alienation. Estranged from his family and alienated in the new places his finds himself, Isaac is portrayed as a permanent outside as himself acknowledges there is no place in the world that he could feel at home.

Names as Site for Negotiation of Identity

In the novel, Mengestu through the character Isaac tackles the question of naming, unnaming and renaming and how it connects to identity as a fluid concept. Isaac’s search for identity is constructed around his flight from his own names and past in his need to reinvent himself across borders. Growing up back in his village, Isaac professes his desire to leave home because he always felt like a stranger. Even before leaving home Isaac had earlier on given himself different names, though he does not disclose them, in addition to the others he gets in the course of the narrative. In *All Our Names*, names are used as leitmotif to illustrate that identity is not singular or fixed but plural and continuous.

According to Janet Finch, a name "personifies the individual and is also a symbol of uniqueness of the individual" (2008: 711). This makes the name a rigid designator that can attribute identity and impute properties to an object or an individual. (Kripke, 1980:48) Naming as Ganapathy-Dore states "follows birth, a christening that endows an individual with an identity and inserts the individual in a clan or religious or national community" (2013:17). This is the case with Isaac as he narrates

> When I was born, I had thirteen names. Each name was from a different generation, beginning with my father and going back from him. I was the first one in our village to have thirteen names. Our family was considered blessed to have such a history. (177)

This statement underlines the importance of names in Isaac's community and family. For them names reflected the culture, history, memory of the community and group consciousness. For the community naming as Derek Alderman argues is "a powerful vehicle for promoting identification with the past and locating oneself within the network of memory" (2008:195). Isaac did not share in the pride of having all these names because as a boy he knew he did not want to be part of this. He "felt as if [he] had been born into a prison" (178).

In his quest to free himself from this prison, he decides to drop his names as he crosses the border from Kenya to Uganda, "I gave up all the names my parents had given me…I shed those names just as our bus crossed the border into Uganda" (3). Isaac's action reaffirms Derrida's argument "we are not our names or titles; the named may break free from their received names" (1995:12-13) Derrida's statement indicates that names are not fixed entities. This is also emphasized by Bodenhorm and Bruck's argument that "naming, name dropping and name

changing demonstrate the processual nature of embodied practice and the dynamic of identification" (2006:20).

I read Isaac's interest to leave home and acquire new names as a desire for freedom to reconfigure and reconstruct himself as a cosmopolitan self away from the singularity and confinement of the community's culture. Even before he had a chance to leave home as he reveals; "I begged my father to send me away to school, but he said my mother would never forgive him if he did, so I made my own plans to leave….I gave myself different name, which I copied into a notebook that I later burned" (4). When what started as rumours of a socialist revolution unfolded into reality in their village, the narrator's father realized it is time for the son to leave home. When this chance availed itself, Isaac left home for Uganda; by the time he arrived in Kampala Isaac was no one and that was exactly what he wanted.

Kimberly Benston (1982), argues that the act of unnaming involves the power of the sublime, a transcendent impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies and reifications, and thrust the self beyond the received patterns and relationship into a stance of unchallenged authority. (4) Isaac's nameless status gives him the power to redefine himself through renaming and experience "a plurality of identities" (Kroetsch 1989:52). Isaac dropping all his names consequently being nameless gives him a chance to attain plurality of identities through the different nicknames, and names he picks or is given in the novel.

The first time the narrator meets with his friend Isaac in Uganda at the university, Isaac nicknames the narrator "professor" (4). The narrator does not protest the nickname because he always "wanted to be a writer" (4) hence that name identified with a part of himself, and from that moment Isaac took to calling him "Professor or the Professor" (5). This marked the start of

their friendship. Later on, in celebration of the paper revolution victory that the two started at the university, Isaac suggests that is time for the narrator to choose a different name for himself. "You're no longer just the Professor…it's time you moved to something new. Choose someone famous, but not too famous" (40). The narrator picked Langston because he knew that he had attended the conference of writers at the university that gave shape to his early ambitions, and the narrator instantly felt attached to his name. The narrator picking that name identifies with his dream of becoming a famous writer in the future and signals his desire to be part of the global world by having a cosmopolitan existence. Isaac picking the name Langston affirms what Rebecca Walkowitz in her analysis of names and renaming in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* where she distinguishes between nicknaming and renaming stating that "nicknames are informal, unofficial and improper but intimate partial appellations that register a diversity of selves" (2006:143).

The day the narrator is released from hospital after he was beaten and left for the dead; his friend Isaac decides to give him another nickname ironically stating "you look good. I'm going to call you Ali from now on" (104). Isaac nicknaming the narrator Ali emphasizes his status as an outsider in the society and a symbol of "Foreign terrorist threat to the nation" (88). At that time, the narrator was out of a home because his landlord, Thomas had kicked him out citing that the narrator was in trouble with the government.

After the war that erupted in Uganda, the narrator is offered a chance to escape from Uganda to America. In America, a small town of Laurel, he meets Helen who nicknames him Dickens because his "English was perfect like someone talking in a Dickens' novel" (17). This is because before Isaac left his home in Ethiopia, he had read the same Victorian novels a dozen times and assumed that was how proper English was spoken. The Victorian novels offered Isaac

a perception of other distant culture which moulded his cosmopolitan attitude. This exemplify Kwame Appiah argument "cultural purity is an oxymoron [because individuals] already live in a cosmopolitan life enriched by literature, art and film that come from many places and that contains influences from many more" (2006:113).

In addition to the nicknames that Isaac is given and gives himself in the novel; Isaac is also renamed twice under different circumstances. The first instance is when his friend Isaac pays an old man and his son to take Isaac to their small village where it was safe during Joseph's war. On their journey, there Isaac told them his birth name but "by the time [they] arrived at the village his name had been transformed into Daniel- a Biblically familiar name among the devoutly Christian people who lived there" (213). This name transformation of Isaac's name is explained by Ganapathy-Dore analogy about names in times of migration, that names can be "shortened in length, altered in terms of spelling and pronunciation and can be changed to acclimatize to a different language"—but in this case religion (20-21). Even though his name is converted to be acceptable in his new temporary home; it does not do much to camouflage his presence as an outsider there. As he narrates while in the village at first he enjoyed hearing the children say the name as it sounded like a song. The children took interest in his name and expressed pleasure in saying "Hello Daniel or Okay, Daniel every time he moved so much as an inch"(213). This attention later on became a "reminder of his place as a curious stranger—not totally welcome, but easily tolerated" (219).

According to Bodenhorm and Bruck though names have a potential to fix an individual as a member of a certain recognized social group; their detachable feature makes names a powerful tool for determining or erasing identity because names can be stolen, traded, suspended and even erased.(2006:2-4) Their argument on detachability of names is evidenced throughout the

novel as the protagonist drops his names and picks different names in the course of the narrative and later at the pick of war in Uganda his friend Isaac gives him his name Isaac when he gives him his student visa to America to escape the war. As the narrator recalls he "become Isaac as soon as he stepped on the plane" (175). Clara Locatelli remarks that Isaac's "naming and name appropriation signal a procedural construction of an on-going identity" (1999:13) qtd in Franscesconi (8). It is in the last chapter that Mengestu reveals Isaac's birth name as "D—" (253) which does not do much to end his anonymity in the novel. Mengestu through Isaac constructs names as "never definitive products but as performative and open textual units" (Francesconi, 2010:2).

Isaac's anonymity gives him the freedom to be named and renamed "signal[ing] a refusal of finality, of ending up the self, proffer[ing] instead the hope of endless renewal"(Benston, 1982:9); which make the act of naming and the use of names in the novel an ongoing performative process. Mengestu in *All Our Names* illustrates that a name is not enough to answer the question 'who are you?' because an individual is made up of stories and experiences. The performative act of naming and renaming in the novel signify and complicate the possibility of a single marker to contain an individual's identity. Mengestu shares a similar sentiment in his argument that questions "who are you? or where do you come from?" tends to cast individuals into singular solutions, a notion he decries. According to Mengestu, "identities can be and should be much more fluid and much more layered" (2015). All the names that Isaac acquires in the novel convey the meaning of the novel's title 'All Our Names' which imply that identity is much layered and all the names individuals acquire in their lifetime make up their identity.

This chapter has focused on Isaac's search for a cosmopolitan identity away from his home. In his quest to re-establish his identity and make a home in Uganda, Isaac is faced with discrimination as a foreigner and also as a poor boy from Ethiopia hence finds himself always on the margins alienated from the society. In America Isaac is confronted with racism that marks him out as the racialized other. As black man Isaac cannot access some places and the racial prejudice complicates his relationship with Helen. Through Isaac's experiences in the novel, Mengestu highlights the limits of cosmopolitanism manifested in terms of class, national and racial differences which limit the mobility of some identities. In portraying Isaac's journey from his home to Uganda vested with hopes of starting afresh in Uganda which proves futile; the novel challenges the utopian ideals of effortless geopolitical boundary crossing and belonging that fails to acknowledge the power structure of nation, race, and class at play in such mobilities. I have also analysed the narrative aspects—narrative voice and focalization in presenting the experiences of Isaac in the unfamiliar cultural spaces. Through the manipulation of focalization, we get to learn of his naivety and vulnerability as a foreigner in Uganda. Through Helen's perspective the reader gets to learn of the racial discrimination that Isaac faces in America. Her change of perception about race in her town through her engaging with Isaac and her attempt at confronting the bigotry in Laurel, challenge the fixed racial hierarchies in America that discriminate others because of their skin colour.

In the subtitle 'Names as sites for negotiating Identity' I have examined how Mengestu uses the leitmotif of names to deconstruct the idea of names as rigid designators of identity. Through Isaac unnaming, naming and renaming Mengestu contests the fixity of names and identity by showing naming as a processual act and that person's identity is much more layered and cannot be fully contained in a single marker.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMPARATIVE READING OF *CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION* AND *ALL OUR NAMES*

In this chapter I do a comparative study of the two novels. In the previous chapters I have examined the novels under study individually looking at how Mengestu presents the question of immigrant characters negotiating cultural identity in new geopolitical spaces and the narrative strategies he employs. In this comparative study themes and narrative techniques are examined taking into consideration the similarities and dissimilarities in the novels. In doing this I illustrate how some elements in the novels feed into each other in a sense that they complement each other. But before I delve into this, I first look at Mengestu's three novels which can be said to make a trilogy, tracing some continuity and breaks among them briefly.

In the three novels Mengestu explores the questions of identity of African immigrants in America as evidently presented from his first novel *Children of the Revolution* which narrates the experiences of three African immigrants as they negotiate cultural identity in America. The second novel, *How to Read the Air* focuses on Jonas', a son to two Ethiopia immigrant parents, journey to understand his identity by retracing his parents' journey from Ethiopia to Midwest town in America. His third novel *All Our Names* focus on Isaac's quest for selfhood that started as a young boy in his village in Ethiopia before leaving for Uganda and later on his escape from Uganda to America. The question of identity is the common thread in the novels; although the two novels under study narrate the experiences of first generation immigrants while *How to Read the Air* narrates experiences of a second-generation immigrant in America.

Mengestu can be said to have a specific technique when it comes to the structure of his novels. In all his three novels, the narration is done in alternating chapters that narrate two storylines that ultimately merge in the last chapter. In terms of setting, two novels –*Children of the Revolution* and *How to Read the Air* are set in America and their claim on Africa is through the characters' memories of Africa. The last novel breaks from this as it has two settings, one in Africa(Uganda) and the other in America; the only novel that makes real claims on Africa through Isaac's narration of his experiences and war in Uganda. Having briefly touched on some similarities and dissimilarities in the three novels, now I embark on comprehensive comparative study of the novels under study in this project.

My comparative study is guided by Stuart Hall views on cultural identity in relation to diaspora and migration, cosmopolitanism and narratology. I examine the novels as complementing each other in the exploration of identity as complex concept and highlighting the anxieties of belonging in new cultural spaces. Mengestu takes a critical cosmopolitanism that questions the exclusionary nature of fixed forms of identity such as race, class and national frames of belonging that tend to exclude some identities from fully inclusion in the new cultural spaces they move to. His cosmopolitan stance rejects essentializing forms of identity built around power hierarchies. Mengestu foregrounds the experiences of minorities in his novels to offer a counter-discourse and "aversion to heroic tones of appropriation…and epistemological privilege views from above or from the center that assume a consistent distinction between who is seeing and what is seen" (Walkowitz, 2006:2).

Mengestu in both novels represent America as a space that excludes and marginalizes racialized figures like the African immigrant characters highlighting the cultural otherness and inequality built around racial hierarchies. The novels construct an image of America that differs from the

dominant discourses of inclusion and equality for all. To depict these false promises of America as a cosmopolitan space that is all inclusive of all identities; the novels articulate experiences of marginalized characters that are discriminated because of their racialized bodies. In *Children of the Revolution* Mengestu uses the myth of the American dream and *All Our Names*, he uses the relationship between Isaac and Helen.

In the novels Mengestu uses America's monuments and buildings depicting the paradox of equality that these buildings signify. In *Children of the Revolution* Sepha reveals the awe and hopes they had towards the buildings—the Capitol, Washington Monument, White House, and Lincoln Memorial— in their first years in America. These buildings signified their hopes of great accomplishment of the America dream. But because of the racial hierarchies in America the African immigrants can only get low paying jobs in America. This is best exemplified by Joseph who in his nineteen years in America has only managed to work a busboy then later as bellhop. He now works as waiter at the 'Colony'. Although Sepha has his own business as a store owner, he has nothing much to show for it. He barely makes enough to pay for both his personal expenditure and the store's monthly rent. Despite their persistent chasing of the American dream to achieve the mobility and inclusion they so desire; years later because of their unfulfilled dreams of making it in America, the buildings are a source of pain and constant reminder of their otherness in America.

In *All Our Names*, Mengestu replicates the idea of monumental buildings which are presented in form of plastic souvenirs that Isaac mails to Helen. In the package, Helen finds small sized Statue of Liberty, Empire state Building, White House, Lincoln Memorial and Golden Gate Bridge with a letter from Isaac informing her that he hopes they can visit those places someday. Similar to the hopes of achieving America dream and inclusion that Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph

attached to the iconic buildings in *Children of the Revolution*; Isaac's gesture depicts his hopes of being accepted in America despite being black and his wish to openly have a relationship with Helen. Mengestu uses these iconic buildings to subvert the idea of America as all-inclusive liberal space where all identities are equal despite their differences.

Mengestu further underscores how race in the novels is used as the power to differentiate and categorize who belongs and who is an outsider. Because of the racial discrimination in America the immigrant characters are marginalized and live in isolation. Joseph and Kenneth in their quest to live the American dream live in the suburbs but their life is marked with isolation and loneliness. Unlike the two, Sepha lives in a poor black community neighbourhood Logan Circle where he also runs his convenience store. Sepha too lives an isolated life in Logan Circle because he does not feel part of the black community in his neighbourhood hence he fills his lonely life behind the store's counter by reading novels. The three alienated and isolated in their adoptive country spend time together drinking in cheap bars and engage in their game about coups in Africa to avoid talking about their frustrations in America. Isaac in *All Our Names* too experiences this alienation and isolation in his one year stay in Laurel town. Isaac does not have any person he can relate with other than Helen. Because Isaac is alienated and isolated in America, he spends his days at his apartment immersed in books so as to fill his long empty lonely days.

Through interracial relationship in both novels Mengestu shows how race matters impede romantic relationship between blacks and whites. In *Children of the Revolution* we get to see an almost romantic relationship between Sepha and Judith, a white lady who moves into Logan Circle with her biracial daughter Naomi. Judith moving to Logan circle was in itself an act Joseph and Kenneth could not believe. They expressed their doubts after Sepha informed them

that a white woman is moving next door to him because of the deep-rooted racial divisions in America. The almost romantic relationship between Sepha and Judith fails because of his insecurities as a poor African immigrant who could never measure up to her standards. This failed romance in *Children of the Revolution* is recast in *All Our Names* in the love affair between Helen and Isaac. Mengestu uses this relationship to show the discrimination and alienation Isaac faces in Laurel town. The racism in Laurel town cannot allow Isaac and Helen to express their love for each other in public, so their affair is exclusively in Isaac's apartment.

Judith and Helen are portrayed as open-minded and willing to engage with the other. Judith in *Children of the Revolution* is a university professor with one authored book America's Repudiation of the Past. She is described as a "harsh passion-filled academic" (157), who takes serious America's history both its failures and heroes. In one of her essays that Sepha reads on Beaumont's novel *Marie* or *Slavery in America* she questions the history of racial identity and women's role in America (157-158). The ideological concerns presented by Judith in her book about role of women in the society are captured by Mengestu in these two novels particularly in the way he constructs the women characters Judith and Helen. They are portrayed as agents of change and hope for a cosmopolitan America in their willingness to engage with racialized other. Judith demonstrates her belief in participatory democracy through her moving into a poor black neighbourhood and her decision to participate in the fight against the eviction of blacks from Logan Circle. Helen in *All Our Names* is a voice of change as illustrated by her quest to bring changes in race relations in her town. Helen's romantic relationship with Isaac and the racial discrimination Isaac faces in Laurel town opens Helen's eyes to the bigotry in Laurel town which she never used to notice before. She single-handedly tries to challenge the racial divisions in her town by taking Isaac for lunch at Bill's cafe although she had never seen anyone not white eating there. At the cafe, she witnesses Isaac's

order served in plastic plates while her food is served on the standard plates used for everyone. She realizes that she cannot win against the rigid racial boundaries in her town so she helps Isaac get out of Laurel town to Chicago because there was no room in her town for a relationship like theirs. Helen deems it better for them to move out of Laurel town instead of them falling apart inside it.

Dinaw Mengestu is among the new wave of African writers whose novel *All Our Names* has been accused of promoting the stereotypical image of Africa ridden with death, disease and poverty just like the image portrayed in Western media. Helon Habila decries such a depiction questioning whether this new writing is a fair representation of the existential realities of Africa, or if it is just a "Caine-prize aesthetic of suffering" (2013). He goes on to state that Bulawayo in her novel has a

> palpable anxiety to cover every "African" topic; almost as if the writer had a checklist made from the morning news on Africa. Her novel captures 'child soldiers, genocide child prostitution, female genital mutilation, political violence, police brutality, dictatorships, predatory preachers, dead bodies on the roadside.(2013)

The same sentiments are expressed by Dobrota Pucherova as she observes that,

> Caine finalists have drawn stereotypical image of Africa as a continent torn apart by war and violence, where poverty destroys people's dignity, ruling elites exploit the masses, rape happens on a daily basis and wars, genocide and chemical explosions threaten live hoods, mediated through a language of postcolonial subversion and hybridity. (2011:20)

This aesthetic of suffering is evident in these two novels. Mengestu constructs postcolonial Africa as one rife with violence, coups, and revolutionary wars. The protagonists in both novels have a traumatic past back in Africa, a war that they had to escape. For Sepha he is violently uprooted from his home in Ethiopia during the Red Terror war that claimed his father. Sepha witnessed the beating and torture of his father right before them as a young boy, a traumatic memory he carries and is unable to let go to start a new life in America. Isaac too in *All Our Names* has a traumatic past of war in Uganda where he witnessed the killings of so many people and he even forced to bury the dead at some point. Apart from witnessing, Isaac is a victim of the violence in Uganda, a memory he wishes to keep buried. Unlike Sepha who carries the burden of the psychological trauma caused by the events he witnessed making his life in America move in circles; Isaac does not dwell in the past.

Other than the protagonists in both novels, Joseph too is a victim of violent displacement because of wars in Congo. In addition to their personal stories of war; Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph in *Children of the Revolution* engage in a game of naming coups and dictators in Africa as way to avoid talking about their empty lives in America. Their game starts by one of them pointing to a country on the map of Africa in Sepha's store and the others have to guess the dictator and the year. Sepha confesses that,

> So far [they] have named more than thirty different coups in Africa... [they've] playing this game for over a year now [and] expanded [their] playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerrilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as we can find- the SPLA, TPLF, LRA, UNITA...No matter how many [they] name, there are always more, the names, dates, and years multiplying as fast as we can memorize them...(8)

This game they play about coups and revolution can be compared with the game Isaac and his friend start at the university in Uganda of pointing out the real and fake revolutionaries in *All Our Names*. As Isaac reveals that "back then, all the boys [his] age wanted to be revolutionaries"(4); but as an outsider in the university he could not match the real students in the university, so he imitated these students thinking of himself as a revolutionary in the making. After meeting his friend Isaac, they start a game of pointing out the real and fake revolutionaries in the university that later grows to a paper revolution which they declared as their first act of war. In their paper revolution, they listed the different crimes an individual can commit against the country which satirized the dictatorial regime in Uganda at that time.

They also claimed to be real revolutionaries because "unlike other radical students and revolutionaries" their paper revolution "had no agenda" it was "a true democracy" and it was "for everyone" (56). Their game later on included 'interrogations' where students were to confess their crimes against the country. If students were not sure about what to say Isaac assisted them in inventing crimes borrowing ideas from the president's daily radio broadcast that considered any foreigner in the country be it Europeans, Americans and any Africans who worked with them as enemies of the country. When "one boy confessed to stealing money from his father" Isaac told him "stealing is not a crime in this country" (57), to satirize the rife corruption in Uganda. Although their game started off by differentiating the rich boys in campus from poor ones and later paper revolution; it was their small acts of asserting their presence in the campus and to be part of the student fraternity. This later took a different turn of violence and ultimately the violence grew to a revolutionary war that engulfed the whole country.

Mengestu portrays the brutal killings and triviality of human life during these wars. In *Children of the Revolution,* Sepha recalls the first bodies he saw on the road at the start of Mengestu Haile Mariam Red Terror which were paraded on the roadside to invoke fear in people or whoever may want to challenge or go against the revolution. Sepha recalls that the bodies like "matchsticks on the grass [were] lined up in a row, their feet bare, hung around each of their necks was a crudely made cardboard sign that simply read 'Traitor.' Guarding the bodies was a "lone sentry no older that the boys lying on the ground ... [with] a rifle slung over his shoulder" (217-218). The triviality of human life, exploitation of young boys as soldiers and exploitation of the masses by these soldiers is also depicted in *All Our Names.* Isaac narrates how the soldiers terrorized the villagers in Joseph's village; "the women slipped the silver bracelets off their wrists and necks if they saw any uniformed men ahead. Men stopped to tuck the bills in their pockets below their loose change" (196). Three days after the soldiers arrived in that village they had devoured half of the town. The soldiers misused their recent gained power to intimidate the villagers into submitting their property to them. When one of the villagers refused to hand over to the soldiers his last two chickens; the chickens "were slaughtered right in front of him and his house was burned to the ground" (196). This killing of people in Uganda is also briefly highlighted in *Children of the Revolution,* in a phone conversation between Sepha and Kenneth. They talked about "Joseph Kony in Uganda of The Lord's Resistance Army, L.R.A, who liked to mutilate children. He chops off their ears and lips and nose" (70). This conversation espouses the animosity of some revolutionaries in Africa who kill the innocent like children in order to get power.

Contrary to Hebola and Pucherova's view on the aesthetic of suffering present in these two novels; I view this representation of Africa as giving a voice to the marginalized. I concur with Zoe Norridge's argument that although "many critics perceive the topic of literary pain

narratives as yet another homogenizing western stereotype of Africa as an 'underdeveloped' nexus of violence and death...to ignore representation of pain in African literature, representation that provides a rich various source for academic literary reflection seems to be a greater mistake, a mistake that may indeed be read as 'neo-colonial' in the sense that it forms yet another silencing of suffering" (2013:4). By writers like Mengestu depicting the trials of African nations marked with civil wars, dictatorship, power struggles and social inequalities they show the political dynamics and power struggles at play in identity formation and belonging in the African nations. In using marginalized characters to articulate these concerns Mengestu contests the parochial sense of identity and belonging arguing for belonging that goes beyond the national boundaries. In presenting the consciousness of those on the margins Mengestu foregrounds "marginality as a site of radical possibility...a space of resistance...location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse...from which to see and create, to imagine alternative new worlds. Marginality is a crucial position for the oppressed and exploited to resist, challenge and subvert dominant practises of power" (Hooks, 1990:341-42).

Some of events about Africa narrated in one novel are completed in the other novel. This is the case with the Red Terror war that displaces Sepha in *Children of the Revolution*. Mengestu captures about this war in the novel *All Our Names* in relation to Isaac when "men who weren't soldiers" visited Isaac's village promising them a "social revolution" (178). Isaac's father foreseeing something terrible is about to happen in Ethiopia, decided to send him away. Isaac later confirms that although "it hasn't happened yet it will not be much longer now" (178). *All our Names* is set in the early 1970s and the social revolution hinted at is the Red Terror happens in Ethiopia in the late 1970s that displaces Sepha and claims his father as narrated in *Children*

of the Revolution. Mengestu in an interview with Edward Champion in The Bat Segundo Show illuminates about this connection between his three novels stating:

> Even though [*All Our Names*] is the last novel among the three to have been written, it actually leads the other two novels. This [i]s the novel that precedes the revolutionary that makes the characters in the first two novel flee. (2014)

This statement underscores my argument that these novels complement each other in understanding the power relations at play in identity formation hence reading the novels together gives a deeper meaning on the complexity of identity and politics of belonging in new spaces. So far I have illustrated how the two novels go hand in hand at the thematic level but it is not the case when it comes to technical style. The novels differ in their narrative mode. Although memory plays a vital role in the narration of events in the novels; they differ in the way the narrator recalls these past events and experiences. *Children of the Revolution*, has a non-linear narration while *All Our Names* has a linear narration.

As I have illustrated earlier in this chapter the two novels are complementary in their exploration of the question of cultural identity and belonging across geopolitical spaces. There are also some instances of cross references and some events connect across the two novels. This is not the case with narrative strategies. Mengestu employs different narrative techniques in the novels to communicate his message to the reader, although there is a commonality in these novels in terms of structure and use of first person narrator.

In terms of structure both novels employ alternating chapters narrating two story lines that merge in the last chapter of the novels. In *Children of the Revolution*, through Sepha's narration the alternating chapters captures Sepha's life relationship with Judith a white lady that moves to Logan Circle and his life after her departure from neighbourhood with some events of his life in the earlier years in America and fragments of his life in Ethiopia. This shift between his present and past, the back and forth movement in terms of space and time in the novel underscore its non-linear progression. The novel is concerned with immigrant characters defining and redefining their cultural identity in America hence their past memory plays a vital role in their understanding of the present situation and establish continuity between their past and present. Mengestu uses flashback and present tense narration to intensify the anxiety of the African immigrants and their negotiation of belonging in America. Flashback is used as a technique in the novel to recall these past memories and a way the characters maintain their relationship with their homeland. The use of simultaneous present tense narration evokes a sense of immediacy of the events narrated and presents the stasis of immigrant characters' life in America. The stasis that mark the day to day life of the immigrant characters in the novel and their persistent chasing of the elusive American dream offers a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of success of the American dream.

All Our Names too employ alternating chapters with two story lines. One story lines captures Isaac's life in Uganda as narrated by him and the other story line narrates his experiences and relationship with Helen in America as narrated by Helen. These alternating chapters that carry Helen's voice and Isaac's voice highlight the identity politics and belonging in Uganda where hopes of democratic self-rule prove elusive as the country goes into a bloody revolutionary war, and in America where racial discrimination and division persist. Unlike the *Children of the Revolution* where memory disrupts the logical sequence of narration, *All Our Names* adopts

a chronological order of narration as the reader is able to follow characters' life and development in a sequential manner. This way we are able to understand how the events the narrators experienced changed their perceptions and contributed to their identity formation.

In *All Our Names* a retrospective first person novel, employs both the consonant self narration and dissonant self narration. The tensions between these two selves (experiencing self and narrating self) bring out the growth and development between the naive self and the enlightened self. In the novel Isaac (the narrator) is in a search for a place to belong away from home. Through the perception of the experiencing self we see a naive and gullible Isaac in Uganda who was in constant need of reassurance from his friend Isaac, so he sometimes did things to please because he was the only friend he had in Uganda. For instance, when Isaac (narrator's friend) asked him if he still needed the sling that he wore on his right arm to keep his ribs from moving, the narrator suddenly was desperate to impress him and be rewarded, so he slipped his arm out of the sling and did his best to raise his hand above his head although the pain was far greater than he had expected. The narrator confesses that although "he didn't say it, I felt that I had made him proud" (117). Isaac's actions in Uganda were sometimes out of fear and in other cases out of need to belong. As an enlightened narrator, Isaac can clearly see the situations better now and offer judgements on some of the events he experienced in the past. In America, we see a different Isaac who is more self-assured and knowledgeable enough to understand and accept that there is no place in the world he could ever feel at home and belong. Through the manipulation of focalization, we get to perceive the development of Isaac's identity and his experiences as a foreigner in Uganda and America.

The same development is perceived in Helen through this manipulation of focalization. At the start of her narration Helen reveals some of the stereotypical assumptions she had about

Africans and how she expected Isaac to look like. But after she engages with Isaac and they get involved sexually, she gets to see Isaac as not different from her. Her relationship with Isaac opens her eyes to the racism in her town which before Isaac she only noticed it in extremes. As an edified narrator now Helen looks back at her past misconceptions about race and offers ethical and cognitive judgements on her naïve self who was too blind to have seen better.

As this comparative study has illustrated, Mengestu in both novels explores the question of identity and belonging of individuals across geopolitical spaces using themes of displacement, discrimination, loss and isolation. He highlights the tensions and anxieties that come with minorities' quest to belong in adoptive new spaces. Through the struggles of these minority immigrant characters in the novels Mengestu contests the idea of a blissful cosmopolitan world and rejects the notion of identity and belonging built on fixed notions of race, class and nation that excludes some identities from belonging. Reading the novels together offers a deeper understanding on issues of identity and belonging of the minorities across borders.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how characters in Mengestu's novels *Children of the Revolution* and *All Our Names* negotiate their cultural identities in new geopolitical spaces. My analysis was hinged on the notion of identity as a fluid concept contesting the essentializing notions of identity and belonging that place individuals in fixity of roots and origins. In exploring the issues of identity and belonging as presented in the novels, I relied on the views of Stuart Hall on cultural identity in relation to diaspora and migration, Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and third space, and views from different critics on cosmopolitanism. The theory of narratology was helpful in examining the significance of the selected aspects of narratology in presenting the issues of identity and belonging in the novels under study.

In this study I have argued that Mengestu provides us with liminal characters living in the United States and narrates their daily experiences of negotiating identity in foreign lands in order to underscore the power hierarchies of race, class and nationalist discourses at play in determining who belongs and who does not which deters some identities from achieving their potentialities and mobilities in these new spaces. By foregrounding the characters' experiences of discrimination, isolation and alienation, Mengestu refuses to romanticize the idea of the world as a blissful cosmopolitan place. He also challenges the dominant notions about purity and fixity of identity and culture through his use of liminality, "a transitional state" between two cultures and cultural spaces as evidenced through his immigrant characters who are in constant negotiation between their past culture and present culture in the adoptive society. (Rahaman, 2010:4)

As Bhabha states, this liminal space "opens up possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994:4), and in so doing "instead of exclusion and rejection, the new space [seeks for] inclus[ion] and accept[ance]" (Chakraborty, 2016:149). As this study has shown Mengestu gives a voice to the minority to articulate their experiences hence presenting a counter discourse to the views from the centre that seek to control and homogenize them using the existing power hierarchies of cultures. He also privileges hybridity and liminality to show that "identities are never unified…never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions…[and] are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation"(Hall, 1996:4).

Chapter two and three of this project have explored Mengestu critical cosmopolitanism that challenges the exclusionary nature of fixed forms of identity such as race, class and national frames of belonging that tend to discriminate and marginalize other identities. In *Children of the Revolution*, I examined how Mengestu portrays the false myth of the American dream with its promises of inclusion, equality and democracy for all by accentuating the daily experiences of African immigrant characters in America who are in constant pursuit of the American dream that seems elusive. These African immigrant characters can only get poor paying jobs, and discrimination, alienation and isolation mark their daily experiences which bring to the fore racial discrimination and hierarchies in America.

In *All Our Names* Mengestu presents the limits of a cosmopolitan world through the figure of Isaac, who is in search of a cosmopolitan existence away from home. In juxtaposing Isaac's sense of alienation in Uganda and America, Mengestu highlights the politics of identity and belonging in postcolonial Africa and America. In Uganda Isaac has to confront the politics of

ethnicity, class and nationalist discourses of belonging that deter not only Isaac making a home in Kampala but also Uganda becoming a cosmopolitan nation-state. In America, Isaac as a racialized figure does not belong and his close relationship with Helen is considered inappropriate. Helen's perspective is very significant in the novel in presenting the views from the 'centre' with regard to racism in Laurel town. Her romantic relationship with Isaac opens her eyes to racism in the town which prompt her to challenge this othering of individuals because of the skin colour. Mengestu uses her to show that if the question of race is to be conquered it has to start from within the centre—the whites should be willing to engage with and accept the other.

I also examined the significance of some selected narrative aspects such as narrative voice, focalization, and analepses in presenting the questions of identity and belonging in the novels. In *Children of the Revolution* the use of analepses, where the narrator keeps shifting from the present to the past, shows the characters in constant negotiation between their past and their present, which highlights the importance of the past in understanding and constructing their present identity. Through these flashbacks the characters stay connected with their homelands and help them ease their present frustrations in America. In *All Our Names* the manipulation of focalization presents the development of Isaac and Helen's identity. Narrating retrospectively, the enlightened narrators look back at their past and offer judgments to the naïve experiencing selves at that time. In both novels the narrators closely identifying with their experiencing selves evoke a close proximity of the events; this sense of immediacy is used for various purposes such as making the reader identify with the narrator's experiences, thus evoking the reader's empathy. This also gives continuity between the narrator's present and past selves and establishes credibility. In both novels, the events are narrated in first person

point of view albeit through a subjective and limited point of view experiences are conveyed in an intimate and personal manner making the narrated events feel real and authentic.

This research has shown that by Mengestu representing the limits of cosmopolitanism in the novels; he contests the notion of identity as fixed and confined to geopolitical borders and also challenge the formulation of a blissful cosmopolitan world that ignores the workings of race, class and nationalist discourses of belonging and that limit some individuals from achieving a cosmopolitan identity. As this study was limited to the exploration of how characters negotiate cultural identity and belonging in exile, I suggest that future studies to focus upon the representation of history in relation to post colonial Africa in the novels. Mengestu is concerned with representation of stories about the margins through the experiences of liminal characters. It would be worth studying how Mengestu uses the silenced voices to capture the experiences of ordinary citizens hence offering a counter narrative which may have been omitted from the official history in presenting the painful history of African nations after independence.

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