
DISPLACED SELVES: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CARTOGRAPHY OF MIGRATION IN MARGARET CHINYERE OFFOHA'S *RETURN TO WHERE I BELONG: AN IMMIGRANT AT A CROSSROAD*

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Abstract: *This paper examines the psychological dimensions of migration in Margaret Chinyere Offoha's Return to Where I Belong: An Immigrant at a Crossroad, and it utilises the tenets of psychoanalytic theory to account for the internal conflicts and identity ruptures experienced by migrants in the text. The study adopts a qualitative, close reading and interpretative critical literary analysis of Offoha's novel. Drawing on Freud's and Lacan's theories, the paper unravels the unconscious processes that shape migrants' adaptation, nostalgia, and longing for return. Focusing on the protagonist Ugonna and other minor characters, the study reveals how migration acts not merely as physical relocation but as a profound emotional and cultural dislocation, resulting in marginalisation, and identity change and fragmentation. Offoha's novel explores how migrants are placed between two worlds- neither fully embraced by their host societies nor able to completely reclaim their cultural roots. The paper also explores generational dissonance as second-generation migrants struggle to negotiate bicultural identities, often facing cultural erasure or feelings of shame. Essentially, the study reveals how migration fosters psychological tension while creating moments of perseverance and self-redefinition. It contributes to literary studies that border on migration, maintaining that the immigrant journey is an intrinsic transformation as it is an extrinsic passage.*

Keywords: *Migrant studies, Psychological narratives, Identity constructs, biculturalism, Psychoanalysis, Margaret Chinyere Offoha*

Introduction

Literature exposes the realities of migration by presenting the lived experiences, emotions, struggles and transformations of migrants in ways that statistics, news reports and historical accounts cannot. Through novels, plays, poems, short stories, writers reveal both external and internal dimensions of migration, showing how movement across borders affects identity, family, culture, economy and psychological well-being. Literature humanises migration by giving voice to migrants and illustrating the complexities of displacement, marginalisation, fragmentation, belonging and adaptation. Since the first two decades of the 21st century, Nigerian writers have explored the issues of migration in their literary texts. These texts have garnered scholarly attention. Critical studies such as Kabore (2016), Ibeku (2016), Ladele & Omotayo (2017), Ilechukwu (2022), Ilechukwu (2023), Saar (2024), Uche, Ogunnaike, Alimi & Okekunle (2025), Faye (2026) have focused on the issues of migration in Nigerian novels and short stories such as Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Adichie's *Americanah*, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, "Zikora".

Migration is the movement of people from one geographic area to another, either within a country (internal migration) or between countries (international migration), to live in a new area temporarily or permanently. (Papastergiadis, 2000; Akokpari, 2000; Hagen-zanker, 2008). It is triggered by a variety of factors, ranging from economic opportunities, environmental factors, conflicts, and social factors such as family reunification. Migration is a fundamental feature of human history that has shaped economies and cultures worldwide for thousands of years. Since the beginning of time, people have migrated for various reasons, including the pursuit of safety, education, family reunification, and economic opportunities (Deleva, 2010). Migration can occur voluntarily, as in the case of people moving in search of employment or education. Docquier and Rapoport (2012) assert that the effects of migration go beyond the people who relocate. Migration has a significant impact on both the

sending and receiving countries. Migration can alleviate poverty, lower unemployment, and ease economic pressures in sending countries. The economy of many developing countries is significantly impacted by the remittances that migrants send home to their families. Migration comes with different problems. Fadere (2015) argues that migration gives rise to transnational and transcultural experiences, which in turn create cultural encounters and identity crises, often resulting in cultural conflict where the host community tends to overshadow and diminish the immigrant's original culture (p. 49).

Since the late twentieth century through the first, second and third decades of the twenty-first century, Nigerian novelists have continued to explore migration and its psychological, physical effects such as fragmentation, isolation, dislocation, adaptation, nostalgia and displacement on their migrant characters. Before this period, novelists of the mid-twentieth century like Chinua Achebe have focused on migration by portraying main characters who left the country to pursue educational developments before independence and returned to enjoy the dividends of newly independent states. However, the second and third generation novelists have focused their novels on migration in the twenty-first century and its problems. These novelists in their migrant narratives dwell on characters whom are dissatisfied by the post-independence disillusionment arising from failures in Nigerian leadership which lead such characters to migrate out of their countries. Novelists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, Helon Habila, Chika Unigwe, Jude Dibia, Sefi Atta, Teju Cole, Segun Afolabi, etc., have used their novels to explore migration and its physical and psychological effects on their protagonists.

The psychological and emotional experiences of immigrants have garnered increasing attention in literary studies, where they are often portrayed as struggling with existential displacement, alienation, dual identities, and the quest for a new self in the face of socio-cultural upheaval. Kekeghe (2022) and Ilechukwu (2023) in their studies portray characters in Adichie's short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* and "Zikora". However, in contemporary narratives, significant gaps exist in research concerning the deeper psychological motivations and obstacles encountered by migrant characters, especially in literary works that explore themes of self-identity, belonging, and repatriation. Though there are several discourses on Nigerian migrant literature on the novelists mentioned earlier, there is need to extend such psychological oeuvre to Offoha's *Return to Where I Belong: An Immigrant at a Crossroad*. This gap is particularly noticeable when examining the intricate internal processes that underpin these characters' experiences, which are often hidden beneath the surface of their outward realities. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by exploring how migration shapes the unconscious psychological processes that affect identity formation, emotional growth, and the yearning for belonging, in addition to the external conditions of the immigrant journey in the selected text.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design that relies on close textual reading and interpretative literary analysis of Offoha's *Return to Where I belong: An Immigrant at a Crossroad*. It applies psychoanalytic theory, particularly the ideas of Freud and Lacan, to examine the unconscious motivations and identity conflicts and emotional struggles experienced by migrant characters in the novel. Through detailed textual analysis of the protagonist and other characters, the study explores themes of displacement, alienation and identity fragmentation within the migrant experience. This methodological approach enables the study interpret how migration shapes psychological processes, cultural identity and the characters' search for belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in psychoanalytic theory to facilitate a thorough examination of the mental states of the migratory characters in the primary text. According to McLeod (2024), psychoanalytic theory was developed by Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His groundbreaking work in psychology led him to create a framework aimed at unravelling the mysteries of the unconscious mind and its impact on our behaviour. Freud's theory suggests that our unconscious motivations, shaped by both internal and external influences, are the primary drivers of our actions. This foundational work not only established the field of psychoanalysis but also continues to shape the study of literature and the practice of psychoanalytic therapy. Wellek and Warren (1963) note that psychology can clearly shed light on the creative process. Psychoanalytic theory is employed in literary texts to search for truth in the subconscious states of writers and characters, so as to understand life.

Freud's insight into the unconscious has been pivotal, extending beyond theoretical discussions to provide therapeutic approach that underscores the significant role of unconscious processes in our daily lives. Freud's work in psychoanalysis emphasised that human actions are often driven by unconscious desires, instincts, and early childhood experiences, which form the basis of psychodynamic theories. In this view, unconscious elements significantly influence behaviour, often manifesting in dreams, neuroses, and seemingly inexplicable actions. Freud's psychoanalysis maintains that internal stimuli, including unconscious urges and repressed memories, are the proper drivers of behaviour. This focus on internal dynamics, as well as the role of defence mechanisms like repression and projection, remains a crucial aspect of understanding psychological functioning, particularly in the clinical setting. These defence mechanisms serve to protect the

ego from anxiety by hiding painful memories or projecting unwanted traits onto others, as Freud outlined in his theories of the mind and its layers: the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious (Freud, 1995).

The concept of unconscious processes not only informs psychoanalytic practice but also illuminates the complexity of the mind, particularly in the ways early familial interactions shape it. Freud's personality model, comprising the id, ego, and superego, remains essential for grasping internal conflicts and how they get resolved. The id, driven by the pleasure principle, craves instant satisfaction, while the superego embodies our moral and societal standards. The ego plays a crucial role in balancing these two often opposing forces, navigating the conflicting demands of reality, morality, and instinct. This three-part structure still offers a valuable perspective for understanding psychological growth and behaviour. Freud's stages of psychosexual development - oral, anal, oedipal, latency, and genital further emphasise that our early experiences are key in shaping who we become as adults, with each stage marking significant milestones that affect how we connect with the world and others (Nash, 2018).

In the contemporary context, psychoanalysis has expanded its scope to encompass not only individual psychology but also the social and cultural factors at play. Garcias (2017) examines how the blend of social identity and psychoanalysis, along with unconscious biases and societal power dynamics, significantly influences our psychological growth. This means that our social, cultural, and racial identities are internalised, affecting our unconscious processes and, ultimately, our psychological functioning. These connections between unconscious processes and social identity underscore how psychoanalytic theory have evolved to encompass the broader socio-cultural forces that influence human development.

In therapy, psychoanalytic concepts such as transference and countertransference remain vital for understanding the relationship between the patient and the analyst. Lynch (2019) posits that when these unconscious processes are effectively addressed in therapy, patients can experience significant improvements in their mental health. This is especially important when dealing with personality disorders, where understanding how unconscious drives play out in relationships is crucial for successful therapy. The dynamics of transference and countertransference, where patients project their feelings or experiences onto their therapists, are not just central to the psychoanalytic process; they are also key to healing unresolved emotional conflicts.

Recent studies on the neural basis of psychoanalysis have provided additional evidence supporting Freud's theories. Studies by Boag, Jauhari, and Fite (2018) and Arias, van der Meer, and Vasa (2020) have demonstrated how unconscious processes manifest in the brain, with neuroimaging studies revealing the link between brain activity and mechanisms such as repression and projection. These advances in neuro-psychoanalysis are helping to bridge the gap between traditional psychoanalytic theory and modern neuroscience, providing empirical validation for concepts that were once considered purely theoretical.

Psychological criticism, rooted in the pioneering work of Freud, aims to explore the minds of both writers and characters to gain deeper insights into their thoughts, behaviours, and the subconscious states that underlie them. Cuddon (2013) sees psychoanalytical criticism as "a body of criticism that emerged in the 20th century which seeks to explain the significance of literary texts in terms of psychological development and conflict" (p. 568). The actions, in-actions, conscious and unconscious behaviours of characters in literary texts are analysed in psychoanalytic criticism. This approach, as Okwuokei and Ilo (2021) point out, uncovers underlying psychological truths within literary texts by examining how both conscious and unconscious forces shape these elements.

The application of psychoanalytic theory in literature, as noted by Okwuokei and Ilo (2021), provides an insightful framework for examining how trauma and unconscious processes are expressed in literary works. In their study of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, they explore grief as a manifestation of trauma, drawing connections between the characters' psychological states and the larger societal forces at play. Recently, Ilo and Unuajohwofia (2024) using the psychoanalytic theory in their study of migration, reveals the theme of cynicism in a number of contemporary novels. They argue that cynicism reflects the authors' own frustrations and ambivalence about their diasporic experiences which they project onto their characters. (p. 103) This use of psychoanalytic theory in literature emphasises how Freud's ideas continue to resonate, not just in therapy but also in our understanding of the human experience as expressed through art.

Offoha's novel has received little critical attention in the context of migration and its psychological effects; hence, there is the need to review other literary texts which explore these themes to ascertain the level of discourse on the subject matter. Adichie and Unigwe's fictional works have gained significant attention on the idea of migration. Arabian and Rahimenzhad (2015) analyse the idea of diaspora in Adichie's *Americanah*, focusing on themes like displacement and alienation as experienced by the protagonist, Ifemelu. They argue that these conditions have a significant impact on the psychological state of migrants. Eze (2016) observes that Adichie's *Americanah* portrays migration as a journey shaped by racialisation especially in the United States, where African migrants are confronted with unfamiliar and often disorienting experiences of race. Faye (2026) investigates memory and migration as key thematic strategies in *Americanah*. The study analyses how exile narratives express fragmented identities, disputed histories, and the lasting impact of displacement. It concludes that memory functions as a vital space of resistance to erasure, allowing exiled individuals to assert agency and construct alternative histories that challenge dominant Western narratives of migration.

Also, Ilechukwu (2023) explores the physical and psychological effects of cultural hybridity resulting from migration in Adichie's "Zikora" and how it leads to grief. Adopting Kubler Ross' Grief model, the study reveals the four stages of grief as

they affect the main character, Zikora. Ladele and Omotayo (2017) examine Unigwe's novel from the perspective of migration argue that *On Black Sister's Street* presents the problem of emigration as it grapples with the "consanguineous issues of globalisation, prostitution, slavery, alienation, racism, human trafficking and transnationalism among others (p. 54). Ibeku (2016) opines that Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* goes beyond prostitution but exposes the deteriorating rate of neglect of citizens by the Nigerian government.

The reviews above have explored the relationship between psychology and literature, the idea of migration and its psychological effects in selected Nigerian migrant prose narratives, hence, the need to replicate and reflect these ideas in Offoha's novel is pertinent as is the aim of this study.

Displacement and Marginalisation

Offoha's *Return to Where I Belong: An Immigrant at a Crossroad* presents a layered depiction of the psychological turmoil faced by immigrants in foreign lands. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Ugonna and other characters, Offoha explores the intertwined themes of displacement, and marginalisation, exposing the emotional, cultural, and existential fractures that define the immigrant journey. These themes are not isolated but function collectively to emphasise the psychic and social toll of migration, where the quest for a better life is often shadowed by personal loss, identity conflict, and an enduring sense of unbelonging.

From the outset, Ugonna's movement from Nigeria to the United States is portrayed not simply as a geographical relocation but as a profound disruption of the self. This produces a series of cultural shocks and unexpected difficulty in settling into the new environment. His decision to migrate is initially motivated by dreams of advancement and economic opportunity. However, these aspirations quickly collide with the harsh realities of immigrant life, marked by cultural disorientation and emotional estrangement. Displacement, in Offoha's narrative, emerges as a rupture which is not only from one's homeland but from one's cultural identity, values, and internal stability. In the foreign land, Ugonna finds himself suspended between two worlds: the Nigerian heritage he tries to hold onto and the American society that refuses to embrace him fully. He becomes a man caught in a liminal space, unable to return to his old life yet never entirely accepted in the new.

Experiences of marginalisation further compound the physical and psychological dislocation experienced by the protagonist in the novel. One of the most striking symbolic moments that encapsulate Ugonna's displacement is the snowstorm that he experiences upon his arrival in America. This is expressed in the extract below:

The two childhood friends would drive out of the airport onto the main highway heading towards Kevin's apartment. But the snow was falling faster and heavier than Kelvin could drive on the free highway. Suddenly, the car slid and Kevin could barely control it. Kevin was doing his best to keep the car from sliding. They heard a loud sound behind them; a car had just lost control and slid into Kevin's car, forcing his vehicle to lose control and hit another vehicle in front of him. (p.32)

The treacherous weather conditions, culminating in multiple car accidents as Kevin drives him from the airport, are not merely a literal introduction to the harshness of American winters. Instead, they mirror the emotional and psychological turbulence that Ugonna is about to face in this new environment. The snow, unfamiliar and cold, blankets everything in an alien white, which is a sharp contrast to the warm, familiar climate of Nigeria. This moment becomes a metaphor for the cultural and emotional dislocation that defines his early experiences abroad.

Ugonna's reaction to the snow-laden roads and the chaos of the car crashes illustrates his immediate sense of being out of place. He is physically in America but mentally and emotionally unprepared for the brutal indifference of the environment, both natural and social. The snow, indifferent to his arrival, foreshadows the cold reception he will often face, not just from the weather but from the society he is trying to enter. The car accidents serve as a form of initiation, a traumatic welcome that sets the tone for a journey marked by instability, confusion, and a persistent sense of not belonging. The incident also subtly introduces the theme of marginalisation. Ugonna is entirely dependent on Kevin, unfamiliar with the surroundings, and unable to navigate the dangers around him. He is not in control, a powerful image of the immigrant experience where the newcomer is thrust into a system they do not understand, one that can easily harm them. The fact that his first encounter with American life involves danger and helplessness reinforces his marginal status. The panic Kevin feels after the car accident, particularly his concern about explaining the situation to his white girlfriend and missing the pickup of their child, reveals the pressures and tensions that come with racial and relational dynamics in a foreign society. Kevin expresses his fear thus:

Ugonna felt sorry for his friend about the situation since it was because of him he would be in trouble with his girlfriend. "Kev, let her know what happened; she would understand." "Ugo, she is an American woman' you will never understand what I am telling you. She does not tolerate excuses, especially if it is coming from me. She believes that I am always lying and chasing other women around" (p. 34)

Kevin's anxiety suggests an internalised fear of judgment and misunderstanding rooted in his marginal position as a Black man in a white-dominated context. His need to over-explain and his fear of being wrongly accused expose the racialised lens through which immigrants, especially black men, are viewed. This adds a psychological dimension to the theme of marginalisation, not just from society at large, but within intimate relationships shaped by racial and cultural divides. Kevin's anxiety, can be interpreted in line with Freud's theory of the unconscious in that his anxiety is viewed as arising from deep-

seated fears and psychological conflicts that operate beneath his conscious awareness. According to Freud, the unconscious mind stores repressed experiences, fears, desires and emotions that continue to influence behaviour. Kevin's anxiety and fear of judgment may not simply be a conscious reaction to his immediate environment, rather, they may stem from internalised experiences of racial prejudice, exclusion. These experiences become embedded in his psyche and unconsciously shape how he perceives himself and how expects others to perceive him.

Marginalisation manifests through his vulnerability to institutional and interpersonal abandonment. His girlfriend's decision to surrender him to immigration authorities illustrates how migrants may be discarded when they cease to be "useful." Kevin's lack of legal protection and economic power further isolates him, underscoring his exclusion from both public and private forms of security. Offoha illustrates this condition as not merely structural but deeply personal and humiliating, forcing the reader to confront the quiet violence of systems that render human lives disposable. The novel also captures a pivotal psychological moment in Ugonna's migratory experience as his hope collides with the harsh realities of his culture. While America appears as a unifying "melting pot", the very process of melting implies the dissolution of the self, a subsuming of distinct cultural identities into a dominant norm. His struggle to speak differently, as well as his need to adapt to eating new foods, is another subtle but powerful sign of alienation. Food, a deeply cultural and emotional symbol, connects individuals to their heritage. Being forced to abandon familiar tastes in favour of foreign ones represents not only physical discomfort but also an emotional disconnection from his roots, exacerbating his sense of not belonging. For Ugonna, this becomes a disorienting experience, illustrating how the immigrant is simultaneously drawn to and alienated by the new culture.

An overwhelming experience in the novel is seen when the academic advisor informs Ugonna that he must enrol in non-credit first-year courses. He "snaps his fingers and shakes his head in disappointment," (p. 46) which is a bodily expression of suppressed rage and disbelief. This can be interpreted as a non-verbal manifestation of unconscious emotional conflict. Freud believes that emotions that cannot be openly expressed are often displaced into bodily gestures, facial expressions, or seemingly minor actions. Ugonna's finger snap functions as an outlet for repressed anger. Also, the shaking of his head in disappointment reflects the clash between expectation and reality. This experience erodes his sense of self-worth and undermines years of hard-earned educational achievements in Nigeria, a country where, according to him, "any higher institution will accept his academic credentials without question"(p. 46). The rejection he faces from the American system reflects how migrants often confront institutional erasure of their past accomplishments, fostering both social and psychological displacement. Mr. Chucks's response to Ugonna's frustration: "When you come to America, you lose most of the things you already have including your education. Here you must start from the bottom" (p. 46), reinforces the normalised marginalisation faced by immigrants who are forced to accept inferior social and professional positions, regardless of their previous status or qualifications. This confrontation with systemic marginalisation continues in his professional life. Even after completing a bachelor's degree in the U.S., Ugonna is unable to secure a suitable job due to racial discrimination. Expressing his frustrations, he laments over the harsh reality that despite his education, "getting a job was a nightmare" (p. 58) due to discrimination.

His friend, who had graduated a year before him and had been similarly unsuccessful, advised him to abandon the pursuit of corporate employment, stating that "it is difficult for people like us to find that kind of job due to discrimination against black people" (p. 58). This admission reflects the systemic barriers faced by black migrants in American society. This situation of underemployment, despite academic qualifications, is a hallmark of migrant marginalisation and reinforces a recurring sense of being unwanted or undervalued in the host country. It further reflects the psychological burden of persistent racial exclusion. The advice further demonstrates the psychological process of resignation. Rather than encouraging perseverance, he internalises the reality of systemic discrimination and adjusts his expectations accordingly. It may generate feelings of anxiety, frustration, lowered self-esteem, chronic stress, identity conflict and suppressed anger.

The sense of collective displacement is further revealed in the cab company where Ugonna works. Most of the cab drivers in Diamond Cab Company are foreigners, many of whom were highly educated professionals in their home countries: a medical doctor from India, an engineer from Pakistan, and university graduates from Nigeria and Kenya, each with a story to tell. Their shared predicament of driving cabs for survival, while initially assumed to be temporary, becomes a resigned permanence, reflecting how systemic exclusion pushes even the brightest migrants into economic invisibility. Their calm resignation suggests an internalised sense of displacement and a quiet surrender to a society that continues to reject their value (p. 59).

These external challenges like engaging in non-professional jobs and marginalisation are compounded by a more profound psychological rupture. Freud's (1955) concept of *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny) describes the eerie sensation of encountering something both familiar and strange, which provokes anxiety. This concept resonates profoundly with Ugonna's experience. The America he dreamed of becomes uncanny: familiar in abstraction yet alienating in reality. As Freud suggests, the uncanny often emerges when repressed hopes or traumas return in distorted forms. The dream of prosperity resurfaces as a nightmare of racism, invisibility, and exploitation. This is powerfully illustrated in Ugonna's marriage to Keisha, an American woman. Initially a source of hope and legal stability, the relationship devolves into emotional and physical abuse. Keisha exploits Ugonna's vulnerable immigration status, turning what should be an intimate partnership into a site of control and subjugation. Offoha uses this dynamic to critique how immigrants can become entrapped in relationships and systems that compromise their autonomy and humanity.

Even after achieving professional success and becoming a medical doctor, remarrying, and building a family with Joy, a fellow Nigerian, Ugonna's sense of physical and emotional displacement persists. His material accomplishments do not shield him from the more profound emotional consequences of migration. He grows increasingly concerned about the cultural disconnect between his children and their Nigerian heritage, which serves as a reminder of his gradual detachment from his roots. The erosion of cultural continuity within his family becomes a subtle yet powerful symbol of how migration can lead to cultural dislocation and dilute generational ties to the homeland.

This generational dislocation is also reflected in the experiences of other characters. Dr. Madumere, a fellow Nigerian immigrant, expresses sorrow over his children's detachment from their heritage. His son, Adam, articulates the sense of living "in between two worlds," stating:

We feel like we live in between two worlds. Yes we are at the crossroads of two countries with their cultures. We are not fully accepted as Nigerians whenever we travel home to the birthplace of our father, nor are we entirely accepted as Americans in our own birthplace. This is because of the cultural demands that both countries placed on us. When in Nigeria, the people see us as Americans, and when in America, the Americans view us as Nigerians. Honestly, we feel like the children of divorced parents, each trying to claim the children while denying them home (p. 165).

Migration produces a fractured sense of identity, emotional conflict and persistent search for belonging. They exist in a liminal space where they are unable to identify completely with either Nigeria or United States. This cultural in-betweenness results in a unique form of cultural homelessness that severs generational continuity and belonging. The metaphor of migrant children as children of divorced parents, each trying to claim the children while denying them homage, encapsulates the fragmented identities and divided loyalties that typify the immigrant condition. This portrays the psychological condition of hybridity, a common experience among immigrants who live between two cultures without feeling fully accepted by either. From a psychoanalytic perspective, particularly the ideas of Freud, the situation creates conflict with the ego and seeks stability and coherence while balancing internal desires and external social realities. Here, the ego is pulled in opposing directions by two different cultural expectations. Consequently, the inability to satisfy both expectations simultaneously generates psychological tension, anxiety and inner conflict.

The novel presents migration as a double-edged sword. While it offers avenues for personal advancement, it also inflicts deep psychological and cultural wounds. Offoha does not romanticise the migrant experience; instead, she exposes the costs of dislocation (emotional, professional, and generational). Through migrants' journey, the novel offers a sobering psychoanalytic reflection on displacement, portraying home not simply as a physical location but as a nexus of identity, recognition, and continuity. Its loss, therefore, is not only spatial but existential.

Identity Change, Crisis and Fragmentation

Closely related to displacement is the idea of identity change, crisis and fragmentation, which the novel portrays as a psychological rupture resulting from migratory dislocation. The concept of identity formation and fragmentation in migration focuses on how migrants' identities change or fragment as they adjust to new social and cultural contexts. Migration often forces individuals to reassess their sense of self in response to external pressures such as discrimination, integration policies, and cultural differences (Kivisto, 2015). This process is shaped by external forces like societal expectations and policies, which may marginalise migrants and lead to feelings of alienation. As a result, migrants could experience tensions between belonging and otherness, which could affect how they develop their identities (Ghorashi, 2020).

The novel reveals how migration challenges the very foundation upon which identity is built. According to Lacan (1949), identity is never whole but formed through misrecognition during the "mirror stage" and is continually maintained through one's relation to language, culture, and the symbolic order. Migration destabilises these anchors, throwing the subject into a state of fragmentation. This disintegration of self is most vividly portrayed through Ugonna, the novel's protagonist. In Nigeria, Ugonna is secure in his role: socially respected, culturally rooted, and imbued with a sense of royal dignity. However, in the United States, this coherent self-image begins to deteriorate. No longer seen as a promising youth, heir to a royal lineage, Ugonna is reduced to a mere foreigner, an outsider, and, at times, a burden. The American society, with its indifferent bureaucracies and social systems, does not validate its identity. As Offoha sadly notes:

Adapting to this new culture was one of the hardest things he had to do. He had to learn a different way of speaking English. In Nigeria, people greet each other by saying "hello" or "how are you?" But here in America, one will hear "hi" or what's up." He had to adapt to eating new food like pizza, cheeseburgers and a lot of ready-made frozen food (p. 44).

This confession reflects more than surface-level discomfort; it reveals the symbolic loss of identity. Language and food, the key anchors of cultural expression, becomes a site of alienation. Ugonna's Nigerian English, a marker of pride and identity to him, is now perceived as inadequate, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and cultural invisibility. Ugonna fiercely resists the Americanisation of his name:

I am a prince; my father is the king of our town. I have royal blood in me. My name carries a lot of weight, including that of my ancestors. I must strive to keep it alive. Renaming myself will be a betrayal to my forefathers. I must keep my name; I shall not answer 'Ogna.' My name is Ugonna (p. 49)

This refusal to adopt an American name underscores his desperate attempt to preserve his ancestral dignity and cultural lineage. However, his efforts are constantly undermined by degrading stereotypes and micro-aggressions. He is asked, "Do you speak English in Nigeria?" or "Do you live with wild animals like lions?" (p. 49). Such questions are not merely ignorant; they carry the weight of symbolic violence, reducing a rich cultural heritage to caricature. The novel notes that such demeaning assumptions could trigger psychological and emotional illness amongst migrants, emphasising how casual racism inflicts lasting psychological wounds.

Ugonna's symbolic identity, once securely grounded in the customs and expectations of his homeland, is violently challenged by a system that refuses to recognise his worth. Kevin, his friend, bluntly articulates this cultural truth when he says:

In America, it doesn't matter who you are, whether your father is a king, president, whether you are a medical doctor or any other high-ranking personality. What matters here is not who you are, but what you bring to the table. That defines your status in the country. The saying 'in America, free lunch is not free' often holds true" (p. 43).

Kevin's remark encapsulates the brutal meritocratic ethos of the host society, a world where pedigree and cultural honor are stripped away and replaced by a transactional view of human value. This involves the suppression of one's cultural heritage but your worth and value in the American system in terms of one's productivity.

The disintegration of identity extends beyond Ugonna. Ugonna's father, foreseeing the potential dangers of cultural erosion, warns his son: "Do not go there and become Americanised like your Uncle Tim. Please, my son, remember your home, for this is where you truly belong. The throne will wait for you. And above all, please do not marry a white woman"(p. 23). This admonition reveals an acute awareness of the migratory forces that erode ancestral values and fracture identities. It reflects the fear that cultural assimilation can lead not only to behavioural change but to a complete loss of self.

The same fear animates the strict parenting practices of Nigerian families in the Diaspora, particularly those of Igbo descent. Offoha reveals that:

Nigerian parents in America are stringent with their children. They do not permit their children to run around and with men or get pregnant out of wedlock until they finish their schooling, get a good job, and get married. These parents always want the best for all their children. They also prefer their children to marry within their culture, especially the Igbo parents. (pp. 84-85)

These rigid standards are attempts to preserve a sense of cultural integrity in a foreign land. Yet, they also signify an internal anxiety: the fear that migration may cause the next generation to become untethered from their roots, leading to a fragmented sense of identity.

This psychosocial fragmentation is starkly visible when Ugonna visits Nigeria. The contrast between the two worlds is emotionally profound:

For Ugonna, this was home. Here people love and care for him. Unlike in America, where most people do not know his name nor respect him. Everybody here knows his name and respects him. His home was the place that gave him a whole feeling of security and his identity (p. 64).

The extract above conveys the idea of nostalgia and explores the psychic wholeness that comes from being recognised within one's symbolic order, a wholeness that migration compromises in the lives of migrants.

The children of Ugonna and Joy suffer the most acute form of identity fragmentation. Raised between two cultural worlds: Nigerian at home and American outside, they are trapped in a liminal space. The children are encouraged to speak Igbo at home, but English dominates at school. This dual linguistic exposure creates a split in self-perception. The narrative reveals that although the children were raised eating Nigerian meals like "Nigerian jollof rice", "fufu with Egusi soup" "Ogbono soup" and "Ofe Owerri," they hide these foods at school to avoid ridicule. Those who never appreciated their blackness or their African heritage were quick to condemn it, mocking their food, their thick hair, clothes, accents, and Nigerian names. These painful encounters push the children into shame, alienation, and self-erasure. Some begin refusing to take Nigerian food to school; others isolate themselves altogether. Cultural pride is replaced by embarrassment. What should be a source of identity becomes a burden to be hidden (p. 119).

The emotional and psychological toll of this fragmentation is captured in the voice of young Ahamefula. Confused by conflicting narratives from home and school, he asks his father, "Daddy where are we from?" When Ugonna replies, "We are from Nigeria," Ahamefula counters, "But my teacher told me I am an American, and I told her I am from Nigeria, not America." (p.121) This exchange powerfully captures the existential confusion experienced by bicultural children. They are asked to reconcile two competing realities: a heritage that defines their home life and a national identity imposed by birth and environment. Ugonna eventually tries to offer a resolution: "Son, next time your teacher asks you about your nationality, tell her that you are a Nigerian-American." However, Ahamefula's innocent response: "But can you be from two countries, daddy?" (p. 121) exposes the depth of the child's inner dissonance.

This struggle extends beyond language and food into other visible markers of cultural identity, such as clothing. Ugonna urges his sons to wear their "best Igbo attires" to church, but "the boys did not appreciate wearing them" (p. 120). Their discomfort signifies not rebellion, but anxiety; a fear of appearing different in a society that marginalises African identities. "Igbo clothes represent the culture of Igbo people in Nigeria and around the world," Ugonna reminds them. However, even this

well-meaning encouragement cannot fully bridge the chasm between cultural pride and social survival. The pressure to conform and the desire to belong are so intense that the children often suppress parts of their identity.

Even the adults are not immune to the migrants' experiences of identity crisis and fragmentation. Joy, who was raised in a strict Igbo Catholic household, undergoes a significant transformation as she begins to question the rigid cultural ideologies of her youth. Following her separation from Ugonna, she reflects: "I am a Nigerian-American, not just a Nigerian." (p. 144). This realisation marks a turning point. She embraces a bicultural ideology, encouraging her children to express themselves as both Nigerian and American. However, she struggles to balance this acceptance with moral boundaries, disapproving when Ahamfeula follows his school friends to get a tattoo on his face (p. 144). Ugonna, too, finds himself psychologically suspended between two worlds: "America, which he and his children were now a part of, and Nigeria, a place he cherished so much." (p. 176). He quizzes further:

But how can he choose one country over the other?" This dilemma captures the central tension of identity crisis in migratory experience. Cultural identity is not just about language or food; it is about belonging, about living within a society that acknowledges and affirms one's symbolic self (p. 176).

Through the narrative, the novel reveals that the journey of migration is a passage fraught with loss, negotiation, and the painful splitting of the self. Identity, as the narrative makes clear, is not a fixed essence, but a fragile, fluid, and often contested terrain, one continually reshaped by the forces of displacement, memory, assimilation, and resistance. Immigrants therefore, pay the price of choosing one country over the other - one where they may gain financial freedom but will lose their identity and dignity.

Nostalgia and the Longing for Return

Offoha also explores the emotional and psychological turbulence experienced by migrants through the interrelated ideas of nostalgia and the longing for return. These issues are not treated as mere sentimental reflections but as profound psychological realities that shape the identity and emotional well-being of the migrant characters, particularly the protagonist, Ugonna. Migration often forces migrants to suppress parts of their past, either due to shame, trauma, or the demands of survival in a new land. However, the novel suggests that these repressed memories and cultural attachments do not disappear; instead, they resurface through dreams, regrets, or an aching sense of loss. Freud's theory of repression explains how painful memories are buried in the unconscious only to return indirectly, often through neurotic symptoms or compulsive behaviours. The persistent longing for home, as depicted in the novel, is thus not merely sentimental but symptomatic of deeper psychological conflict. Nostalgia, in this sense, becomes a mode of negotiating internal loss, a melancholic return to what cannot be recovered.

From the outset, the narrative positions nostalgia as a central force in Ugonna's life. Despite achieving professional success and securing a better material future for his family in the United States, Ugonna remains emotionally tethered to Nigeria. His nostalgia transcends the geographical or spatial idea of "home"; it is rooted in cultural familiarity, communal belonging, and the psychological grounding that his homeland once provided. Over time, the alienation he feels in America intensifies, especially as he watches his children grow increasingly distant from their Igbo roots. Ugonna's decision to send his children to Nigeria each summer reflects his effort to bridge the growing cultural and generational gap caused by migration; these visits which allow the children to bond with their grandparents and other extended family members and experience their cultural roots firsthand, function not merely as vacations but as acts of resistance against total assimilation and as a means of maintaining ties to the identity he left behind (p. 172). The children, though American-born, also reveal traces of inherited nostalgia, particularly in their preference for Nigeria as a space of recognition and belonging. The narrative notes that:

Ugonna's children also enjoy coming home, to Nigeria because it is the place where everybody knows their name and pronounces it well. Unlike in America, where the teachers mispronounce their Igbo names and force them to introduce their names in syllables to make it more acceptable to their American ear (p. 172).

The contrasting experience between visiting Nigeria and living in United States of America highlights the sense of belonging and alienation experienced by second-generation migrants, who, in foreign spaces, face a daily reminder of their outsider status through misnaming. In Nigeria, however, their names are not seen as foreign or difficult; they are pronounced with ease and pride, serving as symbols of belonging rather than markers of difference. This moment in the narrative powerfully illustrates how nostalgia for home is intricately linked to the affirmation of both personal and collective identity.

The intensity of Ugonna's nostalgia culminates in his psychological restlessness and persistent emotional discomfort. Although he attempts to recreate aspects of Nigerian culture abroad, primarily through his second marriage to Joy, who shares his commitment to Igbo traditions, this effort only provides partial comfort. It falls short of fully addressing the emotional void left by his displacement. The foods they eat, the language they speak at home, and the cultural values they instil in their children serve as coping mechanisms, but they cannot substitute for the lived experience of home. This yearning finds its most significant expression in a highly symbolic moment when Ugonna's children arrive in Nigeria and "kiss the dust their father came from and the dust he will return upon death" (p. 172). This gesture is more than a ritualised display of cultural reverence; it is a profoundly spiritual act that connects generations across time and geography. For the children, it signifies their initiation into a lineage and place that claims them wholly. For Ugonna, it represents an emotional homecoming, a tacit

acknowledgement of the part of him that has remained buried beneath years of migration. The image of the dust becomes a powerful metaphor: it is the source of origin and the final resting place, linking identity, memory, and mortality. This moment is an act of self-reclamation and psychological healing, a necessary return not just to a homeland but to the fractured self that migration once splintered

This inner conflict is not limited to Ugonna alone; it reverberates through the lives of other migrant characters, notably Dr. Madumere, whose experience illustrates the generational and cultural dislocation faced by many elders in the Diaspora. On the occasion of his sixty-sixth birthday, he is overwhelmed with sorrow and disappointment as he observes how fully his children have assimilated into American society. Two of his sons have married American women and raised their children in foreign cultural contexts, while his only unmarried son arrives at the celebration accompanied by a white partner. None of them express any interest in returning to Nigeria or engaging meaningfully with their ancestral customs and traditions. In that moment, Dr. Madumere's reflection on his childhood in Nigeria becomes especially poignant. He recalls a time when people, though materially limited, were deeply rooted in communal values and cultural continuity.

This contrast between the contentment of his youth and the cultural alienation of his offspring underscores a profound sense of loss and longing for a return, if possible. His sorrow is not merely that of a father disappointed by his children's choices; it is the grief of a cultural custodian witnessing the erosion of a heritage he holds sacred. Dr. Madumere's nostalgic recollection serves as a mirror of collective disillusionment, where the migration experience is no longer celebrated but mourned. His lament speaks to a broader melancholic undercurrent in the novel: the fear that the cultural thread connecting generations is unraveling, slowly and perhaps irreversibly. In this way, Offoha uses Dr. Madumere's character to illustrate that nostalgia is not a solitary emotion confined to one individual; it is a shared, communal wound that festers in those who see the values of home slipping away in a foreign land.

Ugonna's return to Nigeria is depicted as both inevitable and psychologically necessary. It is not merely a geographical movement but a symbolic journey toward integration, resolution, and peace. His return signifies an attempt to reconcile the fragmented self, to merge the diasporic identity with the indigenous one. Nevertheless, the novel does not romanticise this return. Offoha acknowledges that the home Ugonna returns to is not the idyllic memory of his youth. Cultural tensions, political instability, and changing traditions all complicate his reintegration. Still, his homecoming represents a courageous embrace of truth and identity. It affirms that the longing for home is not simply about place but about self-restoration, cultural continuity, and psychological wholeness.

Conclusion

Offoha's novel, *Return to Where I Belong: An Immigrant at a Crossroad* presents an in-depth portrayal of migration, exposing its complex psychological, cultural, and emotional terrain. Through Ugonna, Dr. Madumere and Kelvin's experiences, the novel reveals that migration is not a linear journey toward prosperity but a process fraught with identity crises, cultural disconnection, and emotional suffering. Drawing on psychological theory, the paper demonstrates how the immigrant psyche becomes a battleground of competing desires for belonging, recognition, and self-preservation. Migrants experience displacement not only from their homelands but also from their symbolic selves, often forced to suppress cultural identities to assimilate. The study also illustrates how intergenerational trauma emerges as children born in host societies navigate fragmented identities shaped by conflicting cultural codes. However, Offoha does not present this as an entirely bleak journey; through nostalgia and cultural resistance, migrants like Ugonna attempt to reclaim and reconcile fractured identities. The paper affirms that healing and wholeness are possible, but only through conscious engagement with one's roots and an honest reckoning with displacement's psychic toll.

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