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## Men at the Edge: Margins and Masculinities in Nigerian Migrant Fictions

**Abstract:** Most African societies are constructed as patriarchal and consequently structured around a hegemonic conception of masculinity. The male gender stands as the embodiment of authority and a symbol of power and privileges. But, since about the middle of the eighties, and for reasons ranging from economic difficulties, political crisis and war to the quest for educational and professional fulfillment, people from different African communities and countries have been voting with their feet, migrating to different countries of Europe and America. On arrival in their different countries of destination, they find themselves confronted with a different kind of social relations. Men in particular find themselves consigned to the margins of their new societies, with all the powers and privileges they had become used to almost completely abrogated. In short, they discover that they have to adjust to a form of masculinity that can only be described as subordinate.

Recent Nigerian works of fiction focusing on the theme of transnational migration have continued to reflect on this situation. The authors of these works have, among other issues, continued to explore the condition of Nigerian males existing at the edges of their new societies in the diaspora, articulating the untold agony they suffer and the crisis of adjustment they experience. My focus in this paper then lies in the exploration of the perspective of transformed masculinities in Nigerian migrant fiction, focusing specifically on Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*.

**Keywords:** margins, masculinities, migrant fiction, edgeland, patriarchy, hegemonic

### 1. Introduction

In his book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Clifford 1997), James Clifford posits that diasporic consciousness is often “a bad situation” which the affected always seeks to make the best of. As he says, “experiences of loss, marginality, and exile (differently cushioned by class) are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement.” In the end, as he drives his point home, Clifford submits, rather remarkably, that diasporic consciousness “lives loss and hope as a defining tension.” (Clifford 1997: 257) The term “edge”

as employed in this paper is close to Clifford's conception of the "bad situation" in his book. It is employed to describe the frontiers, that zone of transition between home and diaspora, a point of suspension in the process of crossing, where, even after the migrant might have put thousands of miles between herself/himself and home, s/he still remains at quite a distance from the point of destination.

The word, in the way it has been engaged in this essay, captures the conditions of existence of African migrants in Western countries as transformed in works of fiction focusing on the situation. Almost to the last title, these works of fiction concern themselves with capturing the sense of loss of the migrants, who on arrival in their new societies, find themselves consigned to the margins of existence, with whatever power and privileges they may hitherto have been used to ruthlessly abrogated. Some of these works include Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale* (Oguine 2000); Taye Selassi's *Ghana Must Go* (Selassi 2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (Bulawayo 2013), Sefi Attah's *A Bit of Difference* (Attah 2015), Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (Adichie 2013), Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods Inc* (Ndibe 2014), and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* (Unigwe 2011). The specific text that I will be focusing on in this paper is Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*, a novel which articulates the crisis of a young man who finds the privileges he had always taken for granted during most of his years in Nigeria crudely terminated on his arrival in America. In discussing the experience of marginality suffered by the protagonist of the novel, I will adopt the theory of masculinities as my organising framework. Nigerian society, as indeed are most African societies, is structurally patriarchal, with maleness standing as the signifier of authority, power and privileges, in fact as the symbol of hegemony. Under patriarchy, and as Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropoulos and Joan Kirby put it in their book *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003), "man is the Self, to which woman is Other." (Cranny-Francis, 14). In terms of methodology therefore, I will proceed by undertaking a brief discussion of the theory of masculinities. Also, since masculinities studies have developed mainly with Western society as the model of analysis, I will, in the course of my discussion in this paper, try to sketch in the complementary features of African masculinities. Following this, I will proceed to apply the principles thus articulated to a detailed discussion of my sample text, Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*. I probably should add at this point that this paper is intended as a first step in my plan to undertake a sustained exploration of forms of masculinities in Nigerian migrant fictions.

## 2. Masculinities

The notion of maleness as a social construction which is central to masculinities studies is almost completely new in most African societies. Here, most people still take the division of humanity into male and female categories to be natural; and the

physical and physiological differences between the two as representing evidence of the given nature of things. The elements of physical differences between the two sexes are themselves considered as indicators of the unique essences carried internally by each of the two groups. And, flowing from this perception, young people are, as they grow up, made to imbibe ideas regarding the appropriate and “natural” roles of each of the sexes while, as an individual, a boy or girl is initiated into the dispositions and behaviour accepted as appropriate to the category to which s/he belongs. It is true, to be sure, that the situation remains largely similar in Western societies and that, as Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon put it in *Theorizing Gender* (Alsop et al. 2002), a long tradition continues to exist in Western thought too “which regards the division of people into male and female and of associated traits into masculine and feminine as being natural, simply a reflection of the order of things.” (Alsop et al., 16) At this point, I would like to add however that, when it comes to the African context, people’s position on such issues is a little more rigid or more fixed than seems to be the case in Western societies. Because of this rigidity of perspectives, attempts by any individual to transgress established boundaries between masculinity and femininity are more often than not treated as sacrilegious, with would-be deviants either forced to fall into line or, should s/he remain recalcitrant, excommunicated.

### 3. African culturally dominant masculinity

I consider it appropriate to enter my discussion of masculinities in this paper by first focusing on hegemonic masculinity as being the culturally dominant yardstick of masculinity in any given society. Hegemonic masculinity is the ideal of manhood, or the set standard which each male is expected to attain but which none can actually achieve in full. In *Theorizing Gender*, Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon contend that hegemonic masculinity comprises two principal features. The first is that, as a cultural ideal, its purpose is not necessarily for it to be inhabited by any male, but rather to serve as a reference point for all their actions. The second characteristic of hegemonic masculinity identified by Alsop et al is the fluidity of its content. Hegemonic masculinity is a dynamic construction which can be altered by the vicissitudes of historical changes. Focusing specifically now on Western society, Alsop, Fitzmons and Lennon submit that at the core of the hegemonic ideal is heterosexuality. Also considered critical for ideal maleness is, to quote the authors, “economic autonomy, being able to provide for one’s family, being rational, being successful, keeping one’s emotion in check, and above all not doing anything considered feminine.” (Alsop et al. 141)

As is the case in Western society, heterosexuality is also very central to African hegemonic masculinity. The ability to get married, have children and maintain the family is considered important as well. Closely attached to the second point

is the question of economic success which, in turn, may be achieved by acquiring education and having a good career or, on the other hand, achieving a breakthrough in a particular business or learned trade. Perhaps in continuity with aspects of pre-colonial cultural practices or, as is the case in certain countries, flowing from the tenets of many important religious faiths, African hegemonic masculinity does not insist on monogamy. On the contrary, a male can have plural spouses if he feels up to it; although, I hasten to add, the practice of one man, one wife has come to be the relative preference among the Western educated, middle/upper class, elite.

Again, as is the case of the Western context, the process of performing masculinity often places men under pressure. However, in the African context, this reality is compensated for by the fact that the ideals of dominant femininity exert equal pressure on the spouse(s) in the family. While the male is supposed to provide for the household, the ideal female is in turn expected to demonstrate understanding at all times and ensure that the home (read marriage) does not fall apart. Patriarchy identifies the man as the head of the family. He is “daddy” to everybody, the embodiment of power and, as stated earlier, the repository of authority. Male children are supposed to aspire to his example. In the final analysis, any crisis which pushes the male to the edge of the household can be interpreted, in fact, in tragic terms.

#### 4. A Lagos playboy

Ike Oguine’s *A Squatter’s Tale* is framed by features of African hegemonic masculinity. The time setting of the action of the novel is the early to mid 1990s, while the geographical setting is both Lagos, Nigeria and Oakland, United States. Obi, the protagonist of the novel was born and raised in a family which was scrupulously guided by the cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Obi is the second of his parents’ three children and the only male. His father studied Classics at University and thereafter pursued a career in the civil service. The apartment in which they live in Lagos is located in an upper middle class suburb of the city. Obi describes it as a “solid, airy two-story house, (with) four bedrooms and a study, a large living room with six tall windows, five toilets and four baths.” (Oguine, 112) As Obi adds, the house also has a “small garden” and a lawn outside.

Obi, the protagonist of the novel, has a middle class background. It has actually been part of his father’s decision to ensure his three children are well-educated. Obi in particular has studied economics in the University. Following his graduation, the old man had used his contact to get his son placed in an old generation bank in Lagos. As the only male child, Obi is expected to aspire to the ideals of dominant manhood and is along this line permitted some indulgence even while still in school. As the protagonist himself reports, he has “been given the room on the ground floor in my first year at university and my parents had pretended not to notice when Robo, and occasional strays, spent the night.” (Oguine, 113)

Additionally, the boy himself seems to have imbibed the tenets of another form of masculinity while at the University. It is a kind of masculinity common to young men with his kind of middle class background. It stresses sexual prowess and generally living in the fast lane. Because of the orientation which he has acquired, Obi demonstrates little patience with the slow pace of progress which is characteristic of the kind of traditional financial establishment in which his father got him placed immediately after his studies. It is not surprising then when he takes the decision to resign his appointment in order to join one of the brisk financial houses that have just started springing up in the country.

It is at this point probably necessary to provide some details of the context that threw up the financial houses which flourished in Nigeria in the 1990s. The military government of General Ibrahim Babangida had introduced a deregulated market economy in Nigeria at the onset of the decade, and an immediate consequence of this was the finance industries which sprang up in large numbers throughout the country. The ethics of these mostly one branch financial institutions contrasted sharply with those of the old banking establishment that people were used to. Claiming to be affiliated to, or connected with, well known markets in metropolitan capitals, including the New York Stock Exchange, the London Stock Exchange, FTSE, NASDAQ, and more, these institutions offered incredibly high interest on deposits, paying them upfront. The salaries they paid their staff were two or three times higher than those of workers in old banks. Other perks they offered included flashy cars for official business, a wardrobe allowance, bonuses for high performing staff and high commissions on deposits again for individual staff who attracted them to the company. In spite of what they claimed however, and with the exception of only a handful, these companies had no connections outside the country and were therefore very vulnerable. The deposits they attracted were invested in sister finance houses operating within the same system but who simply were perceived to be stronger, and these in turn invested them in yet other houses who were also believed to be doing better. On and on this went in circles, and it was clear to all discerning individuals that the bubble must burst at some point soon.

The warning Obi's father issues to his son when he takes the decision to leave his original bank to join one of these small companies is very instructive. To the old man, Obi's action is tantamount to "abandoning a solid and tested home to go and live in a flimsy, shiny zinc shack by the roadside." (Oguine, 66) Obi's unspoken response to his father's words of admonition is very typical. As far as he is concerned, the old man's problem is that of "colonial hangover and civil service gradualism." As he sees it, "the British had made his (the father's) generation cautious to the point of timidity; the civil service had worsened it by making life seem like a journey of a thousand slow motion steps through grades and mini-grades and fixed promotion periods and hierarchies set in stone." (Oguine, 67)

The conditions of service in Baobab Trust Fund which Obi joins after leaving his old bank clearly align with the ideals which the kind of masculinity that he

subscribes to promote. Starting off as the Senior Treasury Officer of the agency, Obi transforms within one year to Treasury and Marketing Manager. Having succeeded in mobilising some deposits for the bank, his salary is doubled and he is assigned an official car together with a driver. Strutting about in designer suits and always with a bevy of women around him, Obi almost at this stage returns to his father to rub in the point by telling him that, as he could see, he was wrong! But the old man's words would soon come back to haunt him. Two years on and Baobab Trust Fund comes crashing down. What is good though is that our protagonist possesses the ability to reflect and admit to himself that he and fellow executives of failed banks and finance companies combined with the policemen in whose custody they now find themselves following the crash, represent "the worst kind of putrefaction in the nation", and, particularly, that "our class of young and not so young bankers (and probably my entire generation of Nigerians) harboured a monstrous, vicious corruption and greed that matched and perhaps even exceeded the age old corruption of the police." (Oguine, 104) The protagonist is prone to exaggeration, of course. But what is important at this point lies in the fact that with the collapse of his finance company, Obi suddenly finds himself in the group of people who are economically marginalised within the society and hard as he himself and his parents try, they fail in their efforts to pull him back from the edge. In a typical African patriarchal structure, the implication of Obi's crisis is that the normal order of things is threatened; this would have been for Obi to take over his father's role as the head of the family when the old man no longer possessed the strength to carry on with the responsibility. But with no dignifying source of income, Obi will become "feminised", which means that he will not be able to command the respect he needs to exercise power and control. It is against this background that he decides to vote with his feet, heading in the direction of the United States of America.

## 5. Black African migrant masculinity

To the best of my knowledge, the masculinity of the Black African migrant in Western countries has never been separately theorised. Rather, it has often been treated in discussions of Black masculinity, and in this case, special attention is often accorded the experiences of African Americans and Black Britons. In Western societies, hegemonic masculinity is constructed as white, and black masculinity is treated as an example of counter-hegemonic masculinity or more appropriately subordinate masculinity. There is no doubt that the dominant construction of black people located in the West is simply as that of the "other". Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon agree that the dominant constructions of black masculinity within Western societies are determined largely by racist and colonial assumptions. Often, the emphasis is more with the body than the mind and, this being so, black men are



then constructed as possessing an “excess of masculinity, producing, for example, an out-of-control sexual appetite.” Alsop et al write further:

The various negative constructions of black and oriental masculinity are rooted... in the exploitation and violence of colonialism. Western constructions of sexuality formulated during the period of colonial expansion are inherently racist, equating sexual excess and a lack of civilization in their conceptualisations of the colonized. White, Western discourses traditionally define African men as having animal-like, uncontrollable sexual demands; oriental men (and women) as subservient, yet perversely malleable. (Alsop et al., 151)

Denied economic participation and social equality, black men find they cannot really participate in the dominant construction of masculinity. This being so, they begin to search for alternative ways of constructing their own masculine identities. Citing from the result of the study which Mac and Ghaill carried out with Rasta Heads in a high school in Britain, Alsop et al consider the features of black counter hegemonic maleness to include “physical strength, toughness and a proclaimed identification with black culture.” (Alsop et al., 153) This masculinity however overlaps with hegemonic maleness in its affirmation of heterosexuality and a display of “homophobic attitudes.”

The argument needs to be pushed a little further for the Black African migrant in Western culture. For a fact, a black migrant who enters the West with a baggage of crisis in tow is never on day one in a position to project any form of manliness. At that stage, what he will be doing may be likened to skirting the edges of the new society, searching for a point of entry. Such a point (of entry) can include enrolment in an educational institution, finding a job or, more commonly, hooking up with a white Western female. Connecting with fellow African migrants is equally an important factor in this struggle to become part of his new society. Together with them, he can commence the process of entering some form of marginal masculinity, which may include regularising (or, as the case may be, legalising) his stay, participating in heterosexist actions, becoming a member of a religious group, hustling, attending parties, drinking and smoking. With time, the experience of a black African migrant may merge with other forms of black masculinities.

## 6. Edgeland

The protagonist of *A Squatter's Tale* arrives in America as an emasculated man. To be sure, the airline that he hands his fare to delivers him safely to the US, and he experiences no problem clearing the immigration formalities. In spite of this, he still is not able to enter his new country, but can only survive on its outskirts. For several months following his arrival in America, Obi exists only in limbo, in a state of suspension.

He is shocked when, on stepping out of the airport in Oakland, he discovers that Kurubo, the Hook, his fellow playboy while at University in Nigeria and who

has promised not only to pick him up at the airport but also to offer him accommodation as well as a “welcoming pussy” in addition to several other fantastic things, is nowhere to be found. He is almost totally distraught when Ego, the wife of the successful surgeon and family friend from Nigeria, turns him down politely when he calls her to see if she could come to his aid. In the end, he has to settle for the decrepit apartment of Uncle Happiness, his mother’s younger brother. At last the man who eighteen years before had suddenly appeared in the upper middle class house of Obi’s parents in Lagos, telling fabulous stories of America and American’s riches and buying him all sorts of things as he takes the then ten year old boy around with him in Lagos, is finally discovered not to be doing well at all. Deflated, sitting alone in the man’s living room, the new arrival from Lagos suddenly begins to wax philosophical: “no matter how well you prepare yourself for disappointment, you are never prepared enough because a little shred of hope will continue to straggle along, ducking in the corners of your mind.” Going on, he says, “and when disappointment comes, it will seek out that straggling hope and crush it ruthlessly.” (Oguine, 10)

Nothing demonstrates better the extent of the shocks which confront Obi on his arrival in America than these words. This is all the more so when the individual in question, as we now know, is a much pampered only son of his parents, and a playboy while at University. As a finance executive, his expression of masculinity comprised of carrying himself with a deliberate air of self-importance, living big and spending big, turning up in designer suits, drinking and womanising, spending holidays in Britain. Here now he is in the United States, suddenly confronted with the realisation that he has no decent place to lay his head. What is more, Uncle Happiness is not even at home to at least bid him welcome when he gets there, and, possibly, to comfort him. In his place are four big, taciturn men, as he describes them, who could not really be bothered about the presence in the house of the young stranger. To be fair to Uncle Happiness, it is never Obi’s plan to stay with him, since it has long before been suspected that the man is not faring well. The decision to call him from the airport was taken only after everything else had failed. At this point, the implication of the key word in the title of the novel comes out with great resonance. Obi is a squatter of the worst kind, one who literally has no accommodation right from the very first day of his arrival. In the end, he decides to move out of his uncle’s apartment after three days to stay with Andrew, a medical student back in their days at the University, an evangelical Christian with whom Obi shares absolutely nothing in common.

Obi’s plans for participating in some kind of masculinity in America consists in struggling to normalise his stay, enrolling for an MBA degree at a University, looking for a job in a respectable establishment afterwards, and then bringing over his girlfriend Robo from Nigeria. All these are still several years away from him. For the moment, the reality that stares him in the face is that of an illegal immigrant. Under this kind of circumstance his choices are limited. He can only pick up



a job as a night guard in a warehouse . On his first phone call to her after his arrival in America, Robo, the girlfriend whom he plans to bring over after his MBA and green card, asks him a question that is laden with deep interpretations: “Why did you have to go? Why couldn’t you have just stayed with me?” (Oguine, 36)

Perhaps the most profound illustration of the fact that Obi remains as yet outside the country in which he now sleeps and wakes lies in the reality of his having to depend on forged documents in order to secure a job. As usual, the protagonist himself provides the most memorable description of the precariousness of existing in such a condition. “The illegal”, he says, “was like a rat subsisting in the sewers of a large city: ignoring the right channels could spell doom.” (Oguine, 48) As a security guard, the variety of characters together with whom he has to do night shifts are themselves, and without exception, men who have experienced different kinds of social castration and who thus represent interesting case studies in different degrees of despair and/or frustration: there is Maina, the College dropout from Kenya who dangles between completely opposed forms of mood swings; there is Fund, the Chinese man whose three daughters keep falling in love with absolute crooks; Mahamood is cast in the image of a follower of the old version of the ideology of the Nation of Islam; Ionesco speaks English with a thick East European accent and yet wants to be an actor on the English language stage in America; and, finally there is the Camerounian, to whom all Nigerians are nothing else but thieves and criminals. The fact that Obi works at night means that he has to spend almost the entire day recuperating. Again, this means that he cannot have any form of social life, which could have afforded him an opportunity of enacting some form of masculinity. It is even due to sheer luck that he does not get entangled with Kurubo, the Hook, who suddenly appears in his apartment one evening to prostrate full length in apology, and with whom he has his first night out in America. Kurubo disappears as mysteriously as he appeared in the first instance. It turns out that his kind of masculinity is performed as a member of a gang of fraudsters. It surely would have been difficult for Obi to extricate himself had it happened that he had got entangled with the gang.

Two events would later combine to help Obi begin to enact some form of masculinity before the end of the novel. The first has to do with the role Ego plays in serving as a matchmaker between him and Vivian. The entry of the kind hearted nurse into the story heightens the dramatic tension significantly; and the reader becomes interested in how Obi will respond to the simultaneous pull being exerted on his emotions by Robo, his girlfriend in Nigeria and Vivian, the woman now with him in America. The second event is triggered by the arrival of a letter from Nigeria in which Robo announces her inability to continue “in a relationship where the other person is so far away...” (Oguine, 181) There is no doubt that Obi is committed to Robo, and it is clear that he reserves a major role for her in his struggle to properly become part of America. Yet, the length and intensity of the fit of lamentation into which he enters after having read the letter still remains

somewhat surprising. Perhaps what is ultimately important is that he emerges out of it determined to begin asserting his maleness as an African migrant in America. In his journey back to recovery, he relives the story of Nebraska Man, a parable, as he interprets it, standing for “what happened to you when you failed abroad and returned home in shame.” (Oguine, 196) He says he as he rises to take the first step forward:

Nebraska Man wordlessly told me I had to somehow find the energy to succeed in America, that failure was unthinkable. I had to stop rolling about in the vomit of self-pity, had to give up all the sense of injury I had hoarded like contraband gemstones. I had to get a green card somehow and find a better job than being a security guard. I had to save money and go to graduate school. I had to begin sending money home to my people. It wasn't going to be easy starting life all over again at twenty-nine, but it had to be done, there was no alternative... I also had to find a locker for memory, for Robo and the sounds and smell of Lagos and the glorious days in BTF and all that, a locker from which I could take out what I wanted now and again and thereafter put it back. The past was an important part of me, but it had to be restrained so the present could breathe. (Oguine, 196)

The words of Nebraska Man as summarised by Obi have brought back the important features of African migrant masculinity. It consists in securing a proper work permit and then getting a good job. It also includes getting married and having children (this is not mentioned, but it is important all the same), obtaining an education and sending money home to assist in the family upkeep and also to execute a project like building a house. As the novel draws to a close, Obi rises up to accept the challenge. Part of his decision is to return to Vivian, having properly apologised to her. Beyond this lies the big challenge of moving from the satellite country where he has existed for more than one year and finding a way to properly enter America. In doing this, his ambition is not to get swallowed up in God's own country. As he puts it, “though I would always be in a sense apart from it (America), always be more Nigerian than American, I also had to strive for a place inside it, I had to find a way to be both apart from and part of this vast country.” (Oguine, 196) Obi's words give expression to the mindset of not just him, but also of most African migrants in Western countries.

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