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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Globalization and Cultural Identity: A Study of Violence in Chris Abani's *Grace Land*

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Article History: Submitted-30/09/2018, Revised-13/11/2018, Accepted-14/11/2018, Published-20/11/2018.

Abstract:

This paper attempts a critical analysis of violence in the novel *GraceLand* by Nigerian writer Chris Abani, with a focus on the role of globalization as the major cause of violence and traces its impact on the cultural identity of the Igbos. Things fall apart in the novel not due to colonialism as in the classic Achebe novel *Things Fall Apart*, but as a result of the new era of neo-liberalism that ushered in extreme economic inequality, and the novel chronicles the resultant chaos, violence, corruption, and the passing away of several Igbo tradition and values. Based on cultural philosopher Slavoj Zizek's concept of 'systemic violence', this paper goes beyond the conventional understanding of violence that focuses primarily on physical violence and situates the systemic violence which is structural and woven in the fabric of the society that is being portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: Globalization, Cultural Identity, Violence, Systemic Violence.

Grace Land (2004) is a novel by Chris Abani which focuses upon contemporary social issues including corruption, poverty, and violence in Nigeria through the story of a teenager named Elvis who tries to escape from his miserable life in the slums of Lagos. Elvis tries to make a living by impersonating his idol, the rock and roll legend Elvis Presley for the wealthy tourists at the beach. Juxtaposed with people like Elvis who are but victims of globalization is the sprawling vista of concrete jungles just opposite to the slum that Elvis inhabits. Elvis's pathetic plight is largely a result of the social problems of the 70s and 80s in Nigeria in which the novel is set. Chris Abani belongs to the new generation of Nigerian writers, often referred to as the "third generation writers" and "children of the post colony" (Adesanmi, 7) whose works largely focus on an attempt to represent the experience of those born and raised in a country marked by long historical conflicts. The third generation writers according to Madelaine Hron, "renegotiates and translates Nigerian cultural heritage and historical roots, as well as the influence of Western standards and values, either culturally, or historically." (30) Their works "encompass the new attitudes, desires, values, and anxieties of

the postcolonial nation.” (Nwakanma, 1) In *GraceLand*, problems of corruption, poverty and violence are largely due to globalization; a phenomenon that ushers in growth and development, but which also had severe negative impact on the poor population such as Elvis and his family. Abani presents a society in which violence not just occurs but is almost considered as a normal way of life. It is important to examine and look at violence in the novel not just as isolated occurrences but with an attempt to locate violence within the new social order that is structured by globalization.

Violence as a concept has undergone tremendous changes throughout the ages. An understanding of violence solely as an overt physical manifestation of force on individuals or groups would now be a limited knowledge of the subject. Its definition has been continually evolving with an increasing philosophical interest that goes beyond its overtly physical manifestations to more covert psychological and institutional practices. Theorists such as Johan Galtung go beyond the simplistic definition of violence as an overt physical manifestation of force and stated that, “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations. (Galtung, 168) Almost similar to Galtung’s concept of “structural violence” (Vorobej, 84), philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Zizek in his work *Violence* (2008) examines the nature and dimension of violence, and came up with what he terms as “systemic” violence. According to him, systemic violence is violence which is inherent in human social structure, which has become the normal state of things from which we perceive what he called subjective violence, which is violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. Systemic or objective violence:

is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent...It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence. (Zizek, 2)

Hence, discussion of violence in this paper would advocate a conceptual framework that addresses beyond physical violence wherein violence is understood to include structural violence or psychological violence. While the overt physical violence in the forms of wars, terrorist attacks or mass shootings easily grab our attention, it is significant to look into systemic or structural violence because people can be “negatively affected –harmed- by

social institutions even if no individual person intentionally harms them” (Govier, 65) and this at large often result in the manifest physical violence which occupies news headlines.

Globalization in general has led to an open relation in terms of economy, polity, as well as culture which could include almost all walks of human life. D. Held defined globalization as “the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual” (Dasgupta, 7) But the free circulation of goods, ideas and lifestyle also became a ground where dominant groups exert their influence on the cultural practices and identities of smaller groups. It became a debatable issue especially in the context of the third world countries who had suffered huge cultural blows due to colonialism. Globalization, with its homogenizing tendency of creating a global culture often result in cultural uproots and assimilation of their unique cultural practices which forms the basis of their identity. Unlike colonialism, there is no direct physical dominance, and nations willingly adopt free trade for economic benefits. Stating the necessity of globalization and its positive impact, Amartya Sen writes:

A wholesale rejection of globalization would not only go against global business, it would also cut out movements of ideas, understanding, and knowledge that can help all the people of the world, including the most disadvantaged members of the world population (Sen, 27)

But the downside of neoliberalism and its resultant globalizing impact is that the economic benefits of the free market did not reach the vast majority of the population. Wealth and power became confined in the hands of the miniscule minority, creating huge economic disparity. In *GraceLand*, this new capitalist economy created a new class of urban slum dwellers such as the protagonist Elvis. This new social order has a direct influence on culture and society as Arjun Appadurai states:

The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of center-periphery models.....The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics which we have barely begun to theorize. (Appadurai, 296)

The novel whose protagonist’s name comes from Elvis Presley depicts the new cosmopolitan society derived from what Timothy Brennan terms as the “meetings and

mixings of distinct national and ethnic styles” (Brennan, 39) In *GraceLand*, violence is largely a result of the new era of neoliberalism and globalization. It constitutes the structural or systemic violence by creating conditions for poverty, corruption and extreme inequality which results in manifest physical violence. It also led to cultural hegemony as traditional Igbo culture falls apart due to modernization brought about by the neoliberal economy. Elvis Oke lives with his family in the slums of Lagos. His family moved from his village Afikpo to Lagos with hopes of better living standard in the city that witnesses rapid economic development. But slum dwellers like Elvis live a life of acute poverty, in contrast to the sprawling vista of concrete jungles just opposite to the slum that Elvis inhabits. Elvis's first impression of the city after he arrived in Lagos highlights the stark division between the rich and the poor.

[He] let his mind drift as he stared at the city, half slum, half paradise. How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? He wondered. He hadn't known about the poverty and violence of Lagos until he arrived. It was as if people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around its unsavoury parts. People who didn't live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweeping flyovers, beaches and hotels. (*GraceLand*, 7)

Elvis's father Sunday Oke was once a respected man in his village Afikpo. But his status and self respect as a man suffered a blow after he moved to the city, where status and success is measured in terms of financial standing. As a man who was born and brought up in a patriarchal society his masculinity and authority as a man received a huge blow in the city because of his inability to provide for his family. Coupled by his pain and loneliness from the death of his first wife, Elvis's mother, he took to drinking because of his feeling of emasculation in the new social set up. In *GraceLand*, the gradual falling apart of traditional Igbo culture and identity have been woven in the narrative in multiple ways. Elvis's mother Beatrice who is the most important person for the protagonist symbolizes culture and tradition. She maintains a diary where she made a record of recipes for traditional Igbo cuisine and her death and the family's relocation from the ancestral village Afikpo to Lagos is symbolic of the demise of tradition and cultural practices. Both Elvis and his family are tossed about by the new cosmopolitan and neoliberal social set up of Lagos, and they never achieve stability both in terms of livelihood and their place in society. This systemic violence in the form of globalization led to disintegration of indigenous culture and also led to outbursts of violence in the novel.

The cross-national circulation and exchange of goods give way to commodification of human bodies. Due to extreme poverty in a society that witnesses huge gap between the rich and the poor, people in the slums cannot uphold their traditional beliefs nor of their morality. As it is, Elvis also gets involved in human organ trade, an illegal act, but the demand for which has been created by people from the western countries, as his friend Redemption says “No forget de whites who create de demand” (*GraceLand*, 243) Commodification of the body in the forms of prostitution, human trafficking and human organ trade is evident in the novel. The words of the King of Beggars in the novel “Someone does not become a beggar; we are made beggars.” (31) is true to a great extent if one looks at the larger picture of systemic violence . According to Zizek:

Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely ‘objective’, systemic, and anonymous. (Zizek, 11)

The neoliberal social order in Lagos created a condition in which people like Elvis suffer systemic violence and oppression. Caught in the melting pot of tradition and modernity, they exist as a class of society bereft of not just economic stability but also became cynical of their place in society. This systemic violence has been played out both through the character of the protagonist Elvis, as well as the narrative about the nation.

Apart from violent incidents which occurred to Elvis, violence seems to be infused in the normal daily life in the streets of Lagos. An incident where mob vigilantism presides over the fate of an accused thief shows how sudden eruption of violence is a norm in the disorderly streets of Lagos. When Elvis decided to take a closer look at the mob, Redemption told him to stay out of it. As the brutal public execution was carried out in full public display, Redemption’s reply “I don’t know and I don’t care” (225) to Elvis who asked him whether Jeremiah, the accused is a thief brings out the deeply fractured condition of the society. It also vividly portrays how violence has become a routine affair of life in Lagos, and people have become indifferent and almost devoid of basic sense of humanity, as long as they are not direct victims violence.

Elvis watched a young girl, no older than twelve, pick up a stone and throw it at Jeremiah..... That single action triggered the others to pick up and throw stones. The

combined sound was sickening, and Jeremiah yelled in pain. There was something comically biblical, yet purely animal, about the scene. (225)

The violent mob further sets the man on fire, and the policemen simply watched the scene with “bored expressions” (227) which suggest that this type of violence no longer has any shock value. Elvis’s statement that “The fire will spread” (228) after the lumber yard catches fire from the flaming Jeremiah symbolizes how mob violence does not bring solution or justice, but rather evokes more violence.

The tragedy of *GraceLand* lies in the fact that the violence and hardships endured by Elvis is not a personal tragedy. In fact, a large majority of the society including most of the people that Elvis got acquainted with in the story are victims of physical violence and systemic violence. Elvis’s friend and mentor Redemption told him of how he used to sell his blood to the hospitals in order to earn money. His cousin, Innocent’s innocence was robbed early in life as he was recruited as a child soldier in a civil war that broke out during his childhood. Elvis and his cousin Efua were raped by his uncle Joseph. And there were several other instances in the narrative that clearly shows how violence is almost like a casual routine in Lagos, and most people are vulnerable. Though some characters in the novel are perpetrators of violence, the larger picture of what led to these different acts of violence needs to be situated within the framework of systemic violence in the forms of neoliberalism, corruption, capitalism and gender issues.

The Igbo traditional society and culture is not without its fair share of problems. The patriarchal Igbo society considers heteronormativity and masculinity as a significant defining factor of its cultural identity by cementing its position of centrality in the form of rituals. Five year old Elvis was made to kill an eagle in a ritual conducted by the men as a sign of masculinity. Despite Elvis’s reluctance at killing, the ritual was forced on him by his uncle Joseph who said “It is de first step into manhood for you. When you are older, de next step is to kill a goat, and den from dere we begin your manhood rites. But dis is the first step.” (19) When Elvis’s aunt Felicia and her friends play-dressed Elvis as a girl, and Elvis approached his father hoping to amuse him with his hair nicely woven into cornrows, he was brutally beaten by his father to the point of being unconscious as his father Sunday remarked to aunt Felicia “No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual! Do you hear me?!” (62) Sunday immediately shaved off his son’s head in what seems to be an attempt at affirmation of his own idea of masculinity. This culturally constructed essentialist notion of

gender and sexuality led to marginalization of any gender and sexuality that is considered a deviation from the normative masculinity and heterosexuality. Violence against any form of deviation, even if it is only in jest as in the case of Elvis has been justified due to the inherent belief in normative masculinity, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. As Elvis grew older and took interest in makeup, partly as a result of his desire to look like Elvis Presley whom he impersonates, his fear of being mistreated by society reflects the marginalized conditions of people who constitute the peripheries.

With the tip of his index finger, he applied a hint of blue to his eyes, barely noticeable, not enough to lift them off the white of his face. Admiring himself from many angles, he thought it was a shame he couldn't wear makeup in public. That's not true, he mentally corrected himself. He could, like the transvestites that haunted the car parks of hotels favoured by rich locals and visiting whites. But like them, he would be a target of some insult, or worse, physical beatings, many of which were meted out by the police (77)

Sunday did not mourn the death of his wife because Igbo men did not mourn women publicly and it was considered bad taste, despite losing all his interest in life due to the pain of losing his wife. While the women are victims of marginalization in the patriarchal society, men are also in certain ways entrapped by the patriarchal privilege because they also have to live up to the societal construct of masculinity. Sunday, in a moment of frustration expressed this emasculation and defeat that men suffered in a patriarchal society as he vented out his anger to his wife "Of course you don't understand. You are a woman, how could you? Honor is a secondhand concept for you, earned through your husbands or sons. But for us.....for us it is different." (219) The deeply rooted patriarchal bias and marginalization of women is evident in Beatrice's conversation with her mother describing the sad ritual and songs sung when a girl child is born:

Yes, Mama. A dirge. Mournful, carried by solo voices until all de town was alerted of de sadness of de family. And de ring of powder we wore was around de elbow to show the flexibility and willingness to work hard of de woman. When I come back, it will be as a boy. You know dat's de only reason Sunday hasn't taken another wife. Because I bore him a son. (37)

Sunday's frequent reference to his mother-in-law Oye as witch is also reflective of the age old condemnation of strong and opinionated women by society as witches because they

refused to conform to societal construct of what women are supposed to be. Thus it is evident that the society represented in *GraceLand* is fractured not just by the impact of globalization, but also due to certain drawbacks in the cultural practices of the society which fail to evolve with the changing times. Though globalization remains the biggest factor that contributed to systemic violence, the traditional Igbo culture has its own share of age old practices that effectively contributed to systemic violence in the novel.

After prolonged exposure to poverty and violence beginning from childhood, the traditional Igbo life seems to have nothing promising to offer to Elvis. His redemption at the end of the novel comes in the form of leaving his homeland for America, in pursuit of a better future. Elvis's departure for America by using his friend's passport whose name is Redemption symbolizes an abandonment of one's roots in search of redemption in a foreign land.

“It is America, Elvis! Take it. You know how many people are planning for dis and can't get it?” Okon said.

“When did we start thinking of America as a life plan?” Elvis asked.

“When things spoil here. Don't blame me. I no spoil am,” Okon said. (318)

Despite the realization of the far reaching impact of globalization and its complexity as a global phenomenon, what is interesting is the author's attempt to offer certain counter hegemonic discourses to assert the ethnic identity of the Igbos in the novel in the forms of inclusion of Igbo food recipe between each chapter, and also by beginning each chapter with the Igbo Kola nut ritual which reveals significant core values of the Igbos. This inclusion, especially of the Igbo food recipe, which has no direct bearing on the narrative, seems to be the author's attempt to assert traditional Igbo cultural practices through his work. The novel questions Western authority to know globalized Africa, rejecting one dimensional world view, and shifting perspective by placing the experiences of an Igbo teenage boy as the centre from which the colossal wave of globalization is viewed.

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