

HOME AND HOMELESSNESS IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES***D. Bivan Amos**

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Abstract

This paper has examined Maya Angelou's text, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* on "Home and Homelessness" as a motif that is prevalent in diasporic narratives. Her journey of the search motif for a home and identity in Africa, during Ghana's independence in 1957, which became a mirage, is examined. The analysis here is based on texts interpretations where Angelou's search for a physical home was replaced by a psychological as well as spiritual quest for a home which she did not find in either of the geographical spaces. The paper then calls for a compromise between the whites and blacks; hence home could be problematic as much as exile is. Respect for our common humanity devoid of racism or religious bigotry is recommended for peaceful and harmonious co-existence of the human races.

This paper is an attempt to examine the narratives of the search for identity and home as it affects the lives of the individual characters of the African Diasporas involved in the endless search for an identity as well as a place to call a "home." Home as a concept is problematised. This postulation is informed by the fact that scholars and writers view the concepts "home" and "Homelessness" or "exile" from different perspectives. To Angelou at some point in time, home was somewhere far away in Africa and later in America. To Naipaul's Mr. Biswas, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, home is synonymous with 'a house.' Home can be located anywhere, and nowhere. One can still be at home and be exiled, or at home, yet in exile. This argument is stressed by Ojo-Ade's explication of his being exiled in his country as portrayed in his poem "Exile at Home." He asserts that the remarkable fact about exile is in an atmosphere of severe oppression as it was the case in Nigeria in the 1990s. He also argues that exile is not only a phenomenon of migrating out of one's homeland to another country, but, a case of extreme alienation even in one's homeland where a citizen lives like an exile in his country.

It is against this backdrop that this paper engages an African-American (Maya Angelou), born in the diaspora as a descendant of the Victim Diasporas of the Trans-Atlantic Slavery as a microcosm for analyzing the motifs of "Home" and "Homelessness" in Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. The interrogation of Angelou's search motif and its futility in the novel under analysis is discussed in this paper. The following concepts like Diaspora, Home and Homelessness are explicated alongside other scholars' views. Sydoine Moudouma Moudouma for instance, avers that the Diaspora thus falls broadly into two categories, which Paul Tiyambe Zeleza identifies as "Historical Diaspora" and "Contemporary Diaspora" (261). The Historical Diaspora he further stresses, stands for the "Diaspora of enslavement" while the second which is the

“Contemporary Diaspora” stands for “the Diaspora of colonialism and neo-colonialism” (263). The explication of the experiences of the state of home and homelessness of the diaspora born that renders them as being doubly displaced and hence living on the fringes of their diasporic community often leads to cultural hybridity or the Diaspora Compromise. And the foregoing diasporic experience forms the basis for this discourse on “Home and Homelessness in Maya Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes*.”

The concept Diaspora defies a single definition hence it is not susceptible to one universally accepted definition. But no matter the differences that exist in the different kinds of definitions, there are still some common features in all the definitions. Sougou argues that the African Diaspora includes long-term voluntary or forced exiles and immigrants of African descent in other parts of the world. The concept diaspora cannot only be referred to as a long term voluntary or forced exile and immigrants of only African descent in other parts of the world. Other races can form or be classified as diaspora too, whether long or short term. Vertovec says that:

‘The Diaspora’ was of course, at one time, a concept referring almost exclusively to the experiences of the Jews, invoking their traumatic exile from an [sic] historical homeland and dispersal throughout many lands. With this experience as a reference, connotations of a ‘diaspora’ situation were usually rather negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimization, alienation, loss. Along with this archetype went dream of return. These traits eventually led by association to the term’s application toward populations such as Armenians and Africans (2).

Diaspora as defined by Yew is the displacement of people across the world under different circumstances or forms of compulsion (1). This definition supports the earlier argument by Vertovec that diaspora as a concept is not only restricted to African descent, but the displacement of people [Black or White] across the world, and their displacement can be caused by any situation, not necessary “forms of compulsion” as mentioned by Yew. Reflecting on the issue of displacement, Sougou maintains that, Susan R. Suleiman suggests a taxonomy of the different categories of subjects; émigrés, exiles, expatriates, refugees, nomads and cosmopolitans (14). All the listed words like “exiles,” “expatriates,” “refugees,” “nomads” and “cosmopolitans” can suggest a state of displacement of forced or voluntary, long or short term. For her, these words designate a state of “not home” (or being “everywhere at home” the flip of the other side of the same coin), which means, in most cases, at distance with one’s native tongue. Williams on the other hand avers that it is “[a] state of perpetual wandering...” (1). It might be a displacement or the state of not being at “home,” but certainly not a state of perpetual wandering; this is because even the nomad who are in a state of perpetual wandering, stop and even settle in some places for a short or long time depending on the situation around them. The African diasporic subjects as postulated by Sougou, articulate identities constructed far away from their home-lands or mother-lands both in fiction and critical theory (13). These African diasporic subjects can be classified into two categories, namely: voluntary and involuntary immigrants who try to maintain an identity with Africa as well as their diasporic locations. Harris in his opinion puts it thus:

The African diaspora is a triadic relationship linking a dispersed group of people to the home land, Africa, and to their host or adopted countries. Diasporas develop and reinforce images and ideas about themselves and their original homelands, as well as affect the economics, politics, and social dynamics of both the homeland and the host country or area (7).

The foregoing experience of the Diasporas is equally what Whitla glibly laments in the following words:

When the boundaries of nations are re-drawn after conquest the question of living on the margin is crucial for survival and for determining origins. When people are scattered, the supposed original unity is broken up into dispersion, a diaspora (2).

These entire diasporic experiences can reduce the diasporas to a state of alienation, rootlessness, homelessness or exile within or outside his or her motherland depending on the circumstances that are prevalent at home or in exile.

The concepts "Home," and "Homelessness," therefore, are relative in meaning. This is because, home which ideally is a place of solace, may equally be a place of bondage to its inhabitants. While Homelessness, which simply denotes the lack of a home or a shelter may also be a haven for the diaspora who is seeking for some kind of asylum, comfort and better life outside his or her home consequent upon some harsh socio-economic and political instability prevalent at home. Whether viewed from the physical or psychological point of view, home and homelessness can be located anywhere and experienced by anyone irrespective of his/her colour or race. As a result of experiencing home and homelessness anywhere, the diaspora, old or new, voluntary or forced can also be homeless even while at home. Therefore, homelessness at times can be the state of not really belonging to either of the spaces, home or exile. It is the state of living on the fringes of one's home or exilic location. Shija Terhemba re-echoes Ojaide Tanure's view of home and exile in the following summation:

Ojaide's position on the question of exile is ironic. He appears lukewarm in spite of the refuge it guaranteed to sojourners. Ojaide views both his home and his country of exile as equally strewn with hazards. Accordingly, he notices a strange duality of fortunes, that of freedom and the lack of it; joy and sorrow, happiness and tragedy all stand close together on either side of the divide. The poet juxtaposes the "refuge" in the foreign home with the uncertainty of the long "night" whose "dawn" is reluctant to arrive. He also compares "the hurt at home" with "the pain outside" and arrives at the conclusion that it no longer matters where anyone may choose to live in the world (210-11).

The foregoing argument reveals that "Homelessness" is interchangeably used with the term "Exile" by scholars and critics as well. And that home and homelessness can be located anywhere. Home can be physical, psychological or even spiritual, and that the state of homelessness can be experienced at home or in exile too. The idea about

home or where home is in Angelou's novel is very confusing to the African American. At one instance Ghana [Africa] was home: "We have come home," (19). At another is this expression of disillusionment: "I suspect we'll all be home soon. Africa was here when we arrived and it's not going anywhere" (213). The idea that home is beyond the physical is captured thus: "Don't care ain't got no home" (121) and "my home is over Jordan" (227) equally attest to that submission that home could be a spiritual or psychological thing. Angelou who also left home in America in search of home in Africa [Ghana] eventually left Ghana back to America, as captured in the following lines:

If the heart of Africa still remained allusive, my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings. The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. It seemed that I had gotten all Africa had to give me. I had met people and made friends (214). My mind was made up. I would go back to the United States as soon as possible (215). I drank with each party, and gave and received generous embraces, but I was not sad departing Ghana (228).

It is this unfortunate situation that explains the irrecoverable state of the Africanness of the Victim Diaspora who is now a mongrel of cultural and identity distortion that the next phase of this paper decries in the words of Du Bois that:

The tragedy of the African Diaspora is the fact that he is caught between two opposing and strange cultural blocks- African and Euro-American- which constitute what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double consciousness," or "his striving to be both European and black" for which he is neither (14).

Angelou has vividly epitomized the tragedy of the African Diaspora as one who is torn between two worlds: the American and the African. She is a victim of Du Bois' "double consciousness" seen trying to be both a European and an African lady. An excerpt from the text is illustrative of this dilemma:

She gathered the dangling strings and pulled them tightly together. Her fingers moved quickly over my head. After a few minutes she picked up scissors from a stool and with a few snips, removed the last hanging strings. 'Now look. See yourself, and tell me.' I looked in the mirror and was relieved that I looked like every other Ghanaian woman. My hair was pulled tightly into small neat patches and the triangular designs of tan scalp and black hair was as exact as the design in tweed cloth (41-2).

The Dilemma of the African- American Diaspora who tries to maintain ties with the exilic location and home is discussed in the next phase of this discourse thus:

The African- American is by every interpretive definition a victim of cruelty in the hands of the slave masters who proclaim 'Christianity' and 'civilization.' No race in human history has suffered the extent of cruelty and oppression like the black race. And no human race has been sold into slavery

in such indeterminate number like the black race. The loss of identity and citizenship, loss of history and heritage, loss of personality all reduced the African-American to a level lower than the animal. This was deliberate in order to justify slavery and racism. The fundamental human rights that is associated with life, freedom, liberty, free association, free movement and even franchise of citizenship and democratic participation. As such, the entire history of the African-American has been the struggle to re-establish and re-invent citizenship rights and identity formation on the basis of equality before the law and social justice of all men regardless of colour, sex, creed, or gender (xiv).

Therefore, the foregoing postulation by Oyigbenu Amirikpa serves as the literary base for further discussion on the dilemma of the African-American who is a mongrel. It was in reaction to this inhuman and barbaric denigration of the African Diaspora in their exilic locations that instigated the various form of reactions and protests among the Black Diaspora that are alienated from home. This experience was not only peculiar to the African-Americans as is aptly observed by Kole Omotoso in Kehinde Ayo, that the African people in the Caribbean also suffer two major psychic wounds:

They have been violently taken away from their ancestral homes through conspiracy of their own people and the white slaves and thus been permanently deprived of the revitalizing effect of their home culture, something which the Europeans of the Caribbean depended upon to survive their sojourns and the Indians looked back to in exile... The second damage stemmed from the denying of the values and worthiness of the African culture and consequent on-going denigration of the continental African culture (2).

Ron Daniel too, clearly states that from Phillis Wheatle's *Being Brought from Africa* (1767) to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959); the African American and the Caribbean artists have been constantly negotiating and re-negotiating their African identity vis-à-vis the mother continent Africa. These negotiations have taken various forms and formats ranging from the purely nostalgic to the Romantic and outlandish to the most obnoxious. This evolution reflects changing perspectives brought to bear on some of the African American authors as they each become intimate or have a closer encounter with Africa. Of particular interest is how their view of Africa from the outside gave rise to a longing for an identification with Africa, or in search of Africa as a substitute for American cultural values that have failed them, or, how in some cases a simple romance with an illusive past eventually turns into distaste for, or a non-commitment to Africa for more recent authors.

Maya Angelou, a Victim as well as Historic Diaspora is the spokesman of the African Diasporas who are victims of exile, alienation, identity crisis and homelessness in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. This novel is an autobiographical text written by Angelou, an African-American born in St. Louis, US, raised in Stamp, Arkansas, and San Francisco was also an immigrant in Ghana where she accepted Nkrumah Kwame's invitation to all Blacks who were bigoted, oppressed and alienated to immigrate to Ghana

during its independence in 1957. This call was welcomed by many African-Americans, and Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* is a trajectory of the narrative of the aforementioned experience of the return and the search motifs.

In this novel she thus expressed and recounted the excitements of the homecoming; knowing fully well that they are Africans who have joyfully returned home to where the colour of their skin is the same as that of the Africans at home, as seen in the next statement. "We were black Americans in West Africa, where for the first time in our lives the color of our skin was accepted as correct and normal" (1). The euphoria of this experience made her to intone: "We had come home..." (19).

The African Diaspora has always got that void of being far away from home and alienated, as such, will want to return home. The fundamental question here has been, "return to where?" This question is so obvious because, the 'home' motif is problematised. One can be at home and still be hunted by a sense of disillusionment, dispossession, exile and alienation.

The more problematic home is where Angelou's protagonist has returned to with a sense of ambivalence as captured in her words "We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination (19). The African Diaspora has some level of euphoria for being united with Africa, the severed root of the immigrant that has been exiled and alienated from home.

Angelou's protagonist here has a dramatic experience with the real or imagined "home" Africa (Ghana), which is expressed in the following lines! "And now, less than one hundred years after slavery was abolished, some descendants of those early slaves taken from Africa, returned, weighted with a heavy hope, to a continent which they could not remember and to a home which had shamefully little memory of them (20). So where are they returning to? To a continent and people who do not know them, whose language they do not understand or can speak? The following words of Angelou buttresses the foregoing postulation: "I listened to men talk, and whether or not I understand their meaning, there was a melody as familiar as sweet potato pie, reminding me of my Uncle Tommy Baxter in Santa Monica, California. So I had finally come home" (21). Angelou's protagonist assumes that life in Ghana will help her in discovering her identity as articulated in her next statement: "Each émigré praised Ghana and questioned my plans to settle in Liberia. There was no need to tell them that I hungered for security and would have accepted nearly any promised permanence in Africa" (7).

The African Diaspora, who is in desperate need of security, is also ever ready to accept any kind of promised permanence in Africa; as asserted by Angelou above. The diaspora latter discovers that life is not that better for them in Africa as it were in their exilic locations, as the next comment made by Angelou attests to this fact:

The receptionist and I could have been sisters or in fact, might be cousins far removed, yet her scorn was no different from the supercilious rejections of whites in the United States. In Harlem and in Tulsa, in San Francisco and in Atlanta, in all the hamlets and cities of America, black people maimed, brutalized, abused and murdered each other daily and particularly on bloody Saturday nights (38).

Aba Ochigbo decries this dilemma of the expectations of the diasporas or asylum seekers that: No matter the expectations that exile is associated with either in Europe, Asia or anywhere still remains illusive (192).

In contrast to Angelou's expectations of life in Ghana as opposed to life in America, it is appropriate to categorically state that this experience of painful separation from home suffered by the exiled can also be suffered at home; and exile may not necessarily be a place of eventual return to some diasporas or their true home. Just like exile could be hostile, home could also emit such an experience to its inhabitants. Shija Terhamba reiterates Ojaide Tanure's view of home and exile [Homelessness] in support of the forgoing argument:

Ojaide's position on the question of exile is ironic. He appears lukewarm in spite of the refuge it guaranteed to sojourners. Ojaide views both his home and his country of exile as equally strewn with hazards. Accordingly, he notices a strange duality of fortunes, that of freedom and the lack of it; joy and sorrow, happiness and tragedy all stand close together on either side of the divide. The poet juxtaposes the "refuge" in the foreign home with the uncertainty of the long "night" whose "dawn" is reluctant to arrive. He also compares "the hurt at home" with "the pain outside" and arrives at the conclusion that it no longer matters where anyone may choose to live in the world (210-11).

This experience Tsaaior James succinctly argues as not only limited to the physical realm of life, but as all encompassing and touching every aspect of man. He further argues that though exile makes its victims torn in-between two worlds: home and alien space, yet, it has an advantage of enriching the aesthetics of especially the writers because of their dualities as will be seen below:

While exile is traditionally conceived as physical, it can also be spiritual, psychological and emotional, and so without spatial frontiers. While it is mostly seen as external, it can also be internal without the necessity of physical flight. It can also be voluntary or imposed. In all these, the idea of "home" is very central and focal just like there are the push and pull precipitations of exile. For writers and artists who are unfortunate to live where politically intolerant and totalitarian regimes dominate the structures of power of economic systems and do not guarantee a decent and fulfilled life, exile becomes the inevitable option for self-preservation and self-definition, and so competes for the prospective exile's soul. While these writers are torn between home and an alien space, this exilic condition also confers on them the status of cosmopolitan citizens as they inhabit two wor(l)ds and benefit from these dualities which also enrich their aesthetics (30-1).

This paper discusses Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* principally on the quest for "home" and "roots" which becomes central to the Black Diasporic Literature. And it has critically looked at the dilemma in the inability of the

diaspora to fully identify with the exilic location as well as their home. Angelou, case in point discovers that she will never be a genuine African, but a cultural limbo who tries to mimic the African culture. This is what underscores the compromise, when the Victim or Contemporary Diaspora accepts that he or she cannot be a genuine African or a pure American or Briton, but a hybrid or a mongrel. Angelou's quest for a home and security in Africa ends on this note: "I drank with each party, and gave and received generous embraces, but I was not sad departing Ghana. ... This second leave-taking would not be onerous, (228).

The disillusionment encountered by Angelou at the end of the journey to Africa results in the Diaspora Compromise, that is, accepting what she could not change, her African heritage and her state in America as a victim of history. The Historical or Victim Diaspora like Angelou here is left hankering after home with no solution to her state of life, rather than accept what she cannot change, her Africanness and Americanness, a victim of double consciousness and cultural limbo. Returning home to America at the end of the search for home and roots in Africa (Ghana) to accept her Negro identity and American home in the midst of a pool of whites can be better expressed in Achebe's statement in "Dead Man's Path:" "let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch" (76). This is another form of the Diaspora Compromise that also serves as a very strong cord for the promotion of mutual co-existence among the different races (being epitomized by the "hawk" and the "eagle") by allowing every race and ethnic group to perch on the same tree and branch of cultural interactions. The conclusion is therefore premised on the fact that respect for our common humanity devoid of racism and ethnocentrism or religious bigotry will engender peaceful and harmonious co-existence among different races and ethnic groups worldwide.

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