

Transnational families in *Women who wait* and *Chairman of fools*: evolving gender roles and copying strategies

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Abstract:

In recent years, the rise in international migration and the settlement of African migrants in European countries has given birth to transnational families. This article analyses transnational families in Zimbabwe and Senegal in relation to “invisible masculinities” as depicted in African literature. This paper compares and contrasts the representation of the space evacuated by men due to migration in Fatou Diome’s *Women who wait* and Shimmer Chinodya’s *Chairman of Fools*. Drawing on Spivak’s work on subalternity, this paper aims to analyse the copying strategies of the family members left behind especially the wives and the mothers who have traditional roles and expectations hovering over their heads. These families are marred by desperation, loneliness and competition, thus creating diaspora orphans and widows. The significance of this study is the manner in which migration redefines the family unit, masculinity and femininity. This study concludes that reintegration into society by the migrant men creates unforeseen hurdles.

Keywords: transnational marriages, separation, loneliness, infidelity, invisible masculinities

1. Introduction:

The fact that Africans long for improved economic visions out of the country is not astonishing since in both Zimbabwe and Senegal, economic and social opportunities have gradually dwindled. Hyperinflation and the absence of well-paying jobs hinder financial and social progression within the two former colonies. *Chairman of fools* written by Shimmer Chinodya focuses on Farai who is a professor in creative writing at an American university and migrates between Zimbabwe and America often. During his absence, his wife transforms into an independent woman who does not depend on him anymore. He cannot bear an improved wife as well as the effects of such adjustment in his life. This in turn leads to his subsequent hospitalisation. In *Women who wait* written by Fatou Diome, Issa and Lamine leave Senegal for Spain clandestinely leaving behind wives and mothers waiting for them as

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indicated in the title of the novel. It takes them seven years to come back to Senegal, Lamine with nothing and Issa with a white wife and three coloured children.

According to Daffe (2008), one Senegalese in ten counts an emigrant among its members and an estimated half of all households have a relative living abroad. Muchemwa and Muponde (2007) claim that due to the current Zimbabwean economic collapse, a new, massive migration is scattering, and restructuring Zimbabwean men at an alarming speed, and will soon be linked to depressed local masculinities. Smith (2004) proposes that we need to have a different perspective of migration since it does not always result in social and fiscal transformation. Of particular importance, is that international migration, regardless of the privileged financial life the migrant enjoys, is always a psychological and social stressful experience mainly punctuated by calamities. Elliot and Urry (2010:3) propound that we now live in an “intensively mobile society” which in turn considerably alters the types of professions, personal identity and life tactics. This society that is a product of globalization, applies new strains upon an individual and his capabilities for mental restructuring.

This paper analyses the selected novels through the lenses of Simone de Beauvoir and Spivak’s schools of thought. Simone de Beauvoir’s concept “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes,” explains the genesis of all the factors that subdue women in society. She further proposes the idea of “consciousness of oppression”, which calls on women to be heedful of their environs and free themselves from all societal ideals that trespass on their privileges. Spivak’s question “can the subaltern speak?” is going to be relevant in the analysis of how the subjugated women react to the suppression prescribed to them by international migration. Furthermore, the emancipation theory facilitates the reading of the texts. Goldman (2001) challenges patriarchal philosophy that anticipates the women to consent to their position as subordinates to men and consequently, stay obedient, passive and disregarded.

2. Textual analysis: *Women who wait*

In *Women who wait* “Issa told her that he would soon depart for Europe, that he absolutely wanted to marry her before he left because he didn’t want to lose her. The dowry, the gifts, the jewellery and the big ceremony, he would take care of that right away on his first vacation back home... the word Europe was his best talisman.” Coumba falls in love with Issa because of the prospect of his migration to Spain. Coumba states that a greater number of Africans migrate or get married to migrants, their decisions is due to their naivety and lack of understanding of the link between living abroad and wealth accrual. “ That knowledge gap is partly responsible for perpetuating emigration and transnational marriages, as non-migrants cleave to a vague of conviction of the immense possibilities that migration can bring,” as pointed out by (Hanaford 2017: ix). Against this background, majority of women prefer getting married to migrants since it is assumed that they are potential providers for all their needs. In this respect, affection, marriage and fiscal desires are intensely interwoven and the choice of a spouse revolves on his ability to migrate. In *Women who wait*, Coumba does not ask Issa how he intends to become a legal citizen of Spain. Furthermore, she neither asks the type of career path he intends to follow since Issa dropped out of high school. Besides, without knowledge of the Spanish language, all odds were against him, nonetheless, Coumba did not dissuade him from going to Spain. Coumba seems to be oblivious of the fact that her partner has no investments to sustain his initial livelihood upon arrival. However, the prospects of a better tomorrow motivates her to support this trip. Instead of discouraging Issa

from going to Spain, Coumba ruminates about all the money he will give her after his return. The quotation that follows summarises the mind-set of the wives as represented by Coumba:

“The same pressures for financial and social advancement and disruptions in family life created by neoliberal reforms that lead men into migration also encourage Senegalese women to willingly marry men from Senegal who live overseas. Gaining a connection to the world outside Senegal through marriage can offer a better chance at fulfilling women’s goals of representation and respectability as well as providing a potential avenue to migration for themselves” Beauchemin et al 2013 : 2

The fame of transnational marriages does not demonstrate a desire to run away from Senegal; nonetheless, it exhibits an aspiration and a plan to improve the life in Senegal through relocation abroad. From another perspective, the emergence of transnational marriages shows a desire to create connections with the international community. On the same level, the migration from Zimbabwe has also been a direct result of the wave of the economic calamity sweeping across the country. The nationals not only migrate to the southern African region but everywhere in the world with most influx towards the United Kingdom, the former colonial master. The success of migrants in the foreign land becomes the success of women in the country. Hence, when the migrants fail to make it, despair is high among the family members back home.

For women waiting for the migrants to return or to send something, discouragement and the fight against poverty are part of their everyday life. In *Women who wait*, the author’s description of Arame’s efforts to provide food for her grandchildren shows her financial precariousness. The narrator states that “feminism or not, feeding remains a constraint imposed on women” (11-12). This implies that during the absence of men who naturally have the duty to feed the whole family, the responsibilities of daily tasks fall on women who “rely only on themselves” (17). While her son is trying his luck in Europe, Arame, for example, assumes the role of pillar of the family by supporting those who have remained behind with her. She shoulders the role of the husband who is incapacitated because of ill health. Arame like many other women had to fill the void left by the young men. Unfortunately, for the migrants without proper documentation, returning to Senegal would be taking the risk of not being able to leave again. Hannaford (2017) proposes that it can be inferred that the absence of men in two-parent split families may redirect women towards an intensive form of mothering that is heightened and persistent involvement in parenting and housekeeping roles. Furthermore, wives have to deal with family pressure, lack of money and lack of love. In her seven years of marriage, Coumba lived with her husband only for less than a year. As for Daba, the situation is pathetic because she has to wait for more than seven years to start her married life. The wives continually ask themselves unanswered questions like the following: “Where is he? Who is he with? What is he doing? When will he come back? And by the way, will he come back someday?” (185). The wives are wondering how many children they could have made without this absence. They become curious to know also of the developments that they could have achieved if their husbands were with them. The lives of migrant husbands develop like a prison because they are in anguish and isolated. The term “widowhood” perhaps addressing to the way of life of those women married to migrants. They are condemned to live in a hope that knows no end.

In *Women who wait*, the loneliness begins with the physical location of Niodor which is an island located in the Atlantic, hence its access is difficult and the meeting with the rest of the world becomes challenging, if not impossible. The narrator asserts, "Because they cannot escape it, the islanders are comfortable with the sea with the fatalism of those who discount no grace" (72). This isolation arouses the curiosity of villagers to go beyond the limits of the field of action. The narrator postulate that: "Even when nothing was happening on the island, the echoes of the sea were heard" (176). The confinement to this solitary environment also produces a succession of monotonous events and people develop the desire to leave the island to see what is happening on the other side of the horizon. From the beginning of the novel, the novelist puts forward the effects of the customs that govern society, thus indicating silence as the most ordinary response to the punishment that happens. This reaction, or this lack of reaction, is the antithesis of the repression experienced by female characters. The narrator describes the situation as follows:

Mothers and wives of illegal immigrants did not trust each other, not easily. They were silent, like dry springs, it was necessary to dig, to dig for a long time, or to wait for an improbable motive to split their carapace and make the word burst forth. Then, escaping from themselves, they spoke, brooded, discussed, and stopped no longer, for their anxiety was infinite and more impetuous than a flood of wintering. (211)

The situation of the female character portrayed in the novel is certainly interpreted in relation to the terms "work" and "silence". This juxtaposition solicits to the persons represented a firmness of character essential to the approval of their status and their condition. Following this logic, Arame is characterised in the novel as "a woman full of will" (34). This demonstrates that the narrative highlights the plight of these women who are disappointed by a life different from the one they anticipated. The narrator points out that, "In a sleight of hand, she had landed in this hovel where everything was nothing but deficiency and desolation. Arame thought dreams are always illusions, rarely projects likely to be achieved" (140-141). Broken dreams accentuate Arame's lonely state.

The mothers and wives become accustomed to the absence of the migrants. They stopped looking at the calendar because it seemed that their dreams would not be fulfilled soon. Each of these women created a special way to fill the void left by the men who had departed for Spain. The narrator indicates, "Since the departure of her Lamine, Arame was gnawing. She blamed herself for having missed so much insight" (128). To cope with the absence of her son, Arame plunged into her intense thoughts. Ironically, "Lamine sent a single postcard during the seven years he spent abroad" (40). The lack of correspondence increased loneliness on the part of her mother.

Diome engages through writing to portray the generally imperceptible reverse of illegal immigration. Because of a few family members who prefer to leave their country furtively, those who stay in the country of origin have to cope with the void left by the migrants. For Coumba, her days and nights were full of boredom. Each night she huddled in the hollow of her cold bed without a husband. The long hope for the return of Issa to Niodor increased every minute but she suffers moral and physical devastation as shown in the novel: "Her routine was languishing, again and again" (213). She led a monotonous life. She only longed for the day her husband would return. As a result, she had no itinerary except waiting. A little

further on, we read that “all the distress of Coumba was under her eyelids. For the rest, she wanted herself to be transparent and non-existent to herself and to others. Issa, would one day bring her death to his conscience” (265). When Issa returned from the West, Coumba saw her dreams vanish. Her hopes were aborted because her husband had married a second woman who was richer than her. The second marriage can be viewed as betrayal of the first wife seeing that she was faithful to her husband and respecting him to the point of adoration. After his departure, she knew very well that loneliness would be forever. In future, the night would fall as painful and as dark and cold as usual. In developing the character Coumba, the writer reveals that in the African society, women cannot be sympathetic to their status as abandoned women because the community believes in patriarchal traditions that require total fidelity of women during the absence of their husbands. Thus, the novelist wants to stigmatize the expectations of this society where Coumba operated in harmony with these obligations by her adherence to a polygamous system at the cost of her own happiness. The author indicates that “Coumba remained in her conjugal home where she no longer hoped for a husband to live for” (274). She literally becomes a diaspora widow and her children also become diaspora orphans. Unfortunately, when marriages become transnational, marital affection diminishes. Couples who do not live together cannot take advantage of the normal delicacies of ordinary married life. Wives in transnational unions cannot make use of these resources and therefore exert significantly less influence in their marriages as compared to their colleagues in non-transnational unions. Hanaford (2017: 13) summarises this inequality as follows: “migrant husbands, however face little restriction on their freedom of movement or the company they keep due to the accepted practice of polygyny they also meet with different expectations for their sexual fidelity.” Muchemwa and Muponde (2007) contend that migration results in absence that is both literal and symbolic. This absence is demonstrated by the involuntary withdrawal of the male body from numerous positions of power.

The novelist awakens the consciousness of the reader to react accordingly in given situations. It cancels out this reasoning where individual well-being is inferior to that of the community in general and that of the family in particular. This vision of the woman is close to the thought of Simone de Beauvoir which states that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes.”

According to the African tradition described in the novel the wives were to remain chaste while waiting for their husbands. For Daba, the woman who married an already departed man out of greed, this was really difficult, as the following extract shows: “No, even if she wanted to, she could not. They were observed by all ” (194). The wives of the migrants had to remain faithful to their empty bedrooms. From the day of her marriage, Daba realises that real life is contrary to her dreams and that the joy she had was quickly transformed into anguish and disappointment. For her, marrying Lamine was the genesis of a sad and cold life. She had hoped for happiness in her life; however she is compensated with poverty and isolation. In this regard, Oteng (2010: 140) suggests that “marriage becomes an economic means for women. They view marriage as the only way to be realized.” This implies that there are women who see marriage as a way out of poverty, a way to access a decent life.

1.2. Textual analysis : *Chairman of fools*

Contrary to Diome's migrants, Chinodya's protagonist Farai, travels to America to represent the few lucky and privileged migrants. However, his life seems overshadowed by loneliness as indicated by the statement "he had time, silence and solitude, but he could not write. He was too lonely to put pen to paper, and his impotence made him feel guilty and restless. He went to the library for books, discovered exciting new authors in translation and read voraciously but remained empty and unsatisfied." (133) Farai tries to get rid of the solitude by taking part in conferences, seminars and interacting on the Internet. He fails to get rid of his loneliness as illustrated in the quotation that follows:

He travelled a lot, though, jetting across states to read from his work at colleges. He attended literature association conferences and made friends, with intelligent, large-hearted people, men and women, with whom he corresponded by e-mail. But the vast distances made real contact difficult. (133)

The Internet that he seeks solace in as a means of curbing loneliness proves insufficient since he continues in his solitude.

Farai's provisional relocation to the United States practically results in the absence of a father figure in his house and this enables his wife to take up "masculine" responsibilities. This change in the normal order of duties also adjusts the marital relations between Farai and Veronica, which transforms their marriage completely. It follows that migration results in transformation of the family structure and changes women's social status. Women represented by Veronica become self-confident and autonomous as they "take on the roles of men." Veronica also transforms in her career as she is promoted and she buys a car. Nevertheless, this creates anxiety and distress in Farai who feels helpless towards his liberated and professional wife. Farai does not like the new Veronica. He wants her to quit her job and become financially reliant on him. Unfortunately, migration created a new family setup in his home.

Furthermore, Veronica's emancipation results in "female masculinity" as stated by Halberstam (2002). This is a total transformation of the woman to take up masculine roles. This situation disrupts the patriarchal scholarship of gender, which regards manliness as the sphere of men and equally femaleness as the women's domain. The new family setup can only be successful if the returning migrant men are willing to accept the unavoidable change. Furthermore, men through the lens of Farai should be ready to accept that return from migration does not result in the regaining of old selves since roles would have been reconstructed during their absence. Nevertheless, inability to consent to these changes activates a predicament for most men, which can destroy their sanity as demonstrated by Farai.

2 Conclusion

Zimbabwean and Senegalese transnational migration have tremendous impact on our understanding of masculinities and femininities and gender relations in general. This impact, as highlighted in the above analysis, as reflected in Shimmer Chinodya's *Chairman of Fools*. Farai's successful rehabilitation could be made possible by the acceptance of Veronica's transformed gendered identity. However, Farai's change also elicits a transformation in

Veronica as she becomes more loving and caring. Thus, *Chairman of Fools* explores the psycho-discursive migration experienced by Farai and the consequences of such migration for his wife, family, extended family, and profession. This psycho-discursive migration is largely triggered by his migration to America and the subsequent alienation and loneliness he experiences. Farai's migration to America is conceptualized as "absence" in the literal and metaphorical sense taking a cue from Muchemwa and Muponde (2007). In *Women who wait*, return migration does not solve the women's problems but actually highlights the invisible men.

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