

The Return Itinerary: Mapping Conflicts and Ambivalences in Véronique Tadjo's *Far from My Father*

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Abstract

The idea of 'return to home' is an important subject matter in Francophone African literature. This concept of return to the origin has been emphasized by the scholar leaders of the African cultural movements like Negritude, as a way out to end the crisis and ambiguities of the subjects in diaspora. However, such a return to the origin is not always a successful one and involves conflict and disillusionment. The exile and alienation of the subjects in diaspora continue even in their own land which make the return rather ambivalent. This paper introduces Véronique Tadjo's novel, *Far from My Father* and attempts to read the conflicts and ambivalences that inform the protagonist's spatial and interpersonal relationships after she returns home through the interplay of 'near and far', 'memory and reality', 'belonging and unbelonging.'

Keywords: African literature; Ambivalent return; Conflict; Francophone; Home.

Introduction

Francophone African literature is a new corpus of writing that emerged in the twentieth century and has its origin in the colonization and the decolonization process of West African countries. The idea of ambivalence is largely evident in Francophone African culture and literature. Our understanding of the concept of ambivalence is largely determined by the socio-political condition and disintegration that have shaped the cultural milieu of the Francophone African regions. Such changes have created turmoil in the inner psyche of the inhabitants which prompted a reconsideration of fundamental concepts like 'identity', 'home', 'origin', which

are otherwise considered stable, fixed and part of the extant values. The changing cultural environment is an outcome of the invading foreign forces that changed and moulded the economy and polity of Francophone African region in a way that could best serve its purpose. The select author for the study, Véronique Tadjó, hails from Abidjan, a city in Côte d'Ivoire. Côte d'Ivoire is a west African country that was under the French colonial power. This novel can be considered a vital part of what is known as the *migritude* fiction. Rosemary Haskell, in her article "Plotting Migritude", has defined *migritude* as "I take *migritude* to include the complete and many-sided situation which includes leaving one's home, arriving in a foreign country, living and perhaps working there, and returning, or not, to the home place" (136).

However, this text emphasizes more on the later aspect, which is, the return to the country of origin. The text presents before us various dynamics of the region and provides a psychological turn to the new generation Francophone African literature. Through Tadjó's seminal novel *Far From my Father*, the study tries to navigate the ambiguousness and ambivalences that inform this *migritude* text with special reference to the main character Nina. The protagonist's ambivalences stem from her *rites de passage* (passage from one state to another) after her father's death and while coming to terms with the present reality of the land and the interpersonal relationship after her return to Abidjan (Gennep 3). In the process, the idea and interplay of 'near and far' 'memory and reality', 'belonging and unbelonging' will be discussed that bring forth the presence of contrary forces which cause the characters to perceive their existence as *liminal personae* (threshold people) (Turner 94-95).

Textual Analysis

This text of Véronique Tadjó narrativizes a return itinerary of the main character Nina to her native place on her father's death. Migration and repatriation are dominant themes of Francophone African novels. The migration of characters is often considered as circular itinerary where the migrants leave their native land only to return and enrich their home with knowledge of the West (Haskell 139). However, this is the case with the traditional oral and colonial narratives. Migration, in the post independent era, not only spurted but also changed its pattern where the diasporic subjects' return itinerary became a contested space. Cultural movements like 'Negritude' or 'Harlem Renaissance' focused on the importance of returning to the root/home to end the ambiguities and ambivalences that the subjects in diaspora acquire while coming to terms with the West-

ern world (Toivanen 67). However, in the writings of the new generation Francophone writers like Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ken Bugul, Mariama Ba, etc., it has become apparent that such returns are rather ambivalent in nature and the state of exile and alienation in diaspora still haunts them. Anne M. Francois in her book *Rewriting the Return* calls such returns as “frustrated quest for the father” which contradicts “the quest for origin and the African Motherland”, a characteristic feature fostered by the Negritude movement (Francois 18).

Véronique Tadjó in her novel *Far From my father*, presents the return journey of her main protagonist Nina in the same line. Nina’s ambivalence and her inner psychological chaos started with the news of her father’s death and coming to terms with the fact that she must return home for the funeral. The very thought of return created uneasiness and inner turmoil that found expression through her physical restlessness that she gets while boarding the plane. A transitional phase came over her with the news of her father’s death. Moreover, Nina’s inability to accept the loss puts her in an ‘in-between’ state. There are particular settings or procedures that perfectly illustrate such in-between states of a person in transition. For instance, the “stairwell” example used by Homi. K. Bhabha in his book *Location of culture* or Anna Leena Toivanen use of the setting of the “hotel” to describe the transition in Sefi Atta and Chimamnda Ngozi Adichie stories (3; 47-62). Similarly, in Tadjó’s novel, the setting of the plane or airport can be taken as representation of liminal space. She was insecure throughout her itinerary which is expressed through the lines “her head was spinning from lack of sleep and the intolerance of her own thoughts when the image of what awaited her in Abidjan suddenly appeared” (11). Again, another factor that contributed to her uneasy homecoming is the fear that her memories will not correspond with the actual reality of her home she is visiting after six years.

Belonging and Unbelonging

The whole narrative maps the ambivalence of the protagonist through the interplay of belonging and unbelonging. Belongingness is a fundamental human need which is absent in the returnee. Double consciousness pushes the character into a state of exile and makes the return ambivalent. The story is set against the backdrop of post Ivorian civil war. The political instability of the region has added another dimension to the whole story raising concern about ideas of ‘home’ and ‘belongingness’. After arriving in Abidjan, Nina was charged with legal documents and Ids that would determine if she could enter the state or not. In one of the checkpoints

manned by soldiers, Nina handed over her passport to the soldier who was checking the Ids. He objected by saying that the passport wasn't a proper form of Id. Hervé, her relative, then told the soldier, which the narrator has stated as, "Boss, we're coming from the airport. She is not a resident here" (Tadjo 14). This very statement from Hervé raises the question of Nina's belongingness and how she is portrayed as the Other in her own land. Such political instability has put the protagonist's identity and belongingness under constant negotiation. The political chaos, from time to time, has hindered the smooth functioning of civic life. In case of Nina, the military officials asking for her Id at the checkpoint situates her as the outsider. Another incident that again questions and threatens her sense of belongingness is depicted through her childhood memory. Nina's conflicting position as an insider /outsider was there right from the beginning. The fact that her mother was a white lady who came from Paris situated Nina and her sister at the periphery. They were never really considered a part of the Francophone African people. Narrating the mother's exilic life, both in France and in Africa, the author writes "When she was in France, she felt like an intruder" (78).

The same fate haunted Nina which made her live in an exilic state everywhere. As the narrator remarks: "The rift was in her, making it impossible to settle down anywhere" (79). Children back in her village used to bully Nina and her sister because of their skin colour which forced them to question their sense of belongingness. The children back in their village tease them by calling names like " Bôfouè" (whites) (89). However, such treatment outcasted them to an extent that it had already ruptured their sense of rootedness. The narrator states "...the damage had already been done" (89). She was exiled to her own native land which led her to question her own identity. However, after returning from Paris such ostracism increased. The gap between Nina and local people, including her immediate family members, increased with the differences in their approaches and perspectives. Although the political aspect is not the main concern in the novel, but that aspect is not undermined by the author. She juxtaposed it smoothly into the narrative of loss and eventual transition.

The new generation Francophone writers' engagement with the politics per se and the nation building process along with the introspective tone differentiate them from the earlier writers. Abidjan is tormented with the military checkpoints that disturbs the free movement of people from one city to the other. Such political instability became one of the push factors of migrations. Nina's relatives discuss about sending their children abroad. However, amidst such uncertainty, Véronique Tadjo also provides hope

for a better future through characters who show concern for the nation building process. Nina and Kangha are seen talking about the problems of the nation. How certain traditional practices like polygamy have deterred the nation from the desired development and how people manipulate certain customs that could benefit them. Kangha comments "they live by their own rules and invented new rules whenever they needed one" (93). Such awareness and involvement in the nation building process again reanchored Nina in the native matrix.

Near and Far

The interplay of 'near and far' is another facet to map Nina's ambivalent return and which can be understood through the interpersonal relations and Nina's scepticism about the traditional practices. Amidst the preparation for the funeral, a certain revelation about the past life of her father came out that left Nina in bewilderment. Near and far, thus, can be understood as a metaphor for the ambiguous relationship Nina shares with her father and with the other family members and her half siblings. Nina's relationship with her father in a way symbolises her relationship with her roots which was growing distant due to certain gaps she failed to be filled. An instance presented by the author that best reflects this sentiment is when Nina, while cleaning her father's room, found a book titled *Witchcraft and How to defend against It, a practical guide for Those Seeking Freedom*. As the title suggests, the text deals with various ways of combatting attack by witchcraft. The discovery of the book laid bare the society that was ridden with superstitious beliefs which was non-acceptable to Nina. The author delineating her situation writes "She suddenly understood that they had been separated from each other by a distance far greater than the thousands of kilometres between them" (49). The presence and excessive reliance on marabout (holy man) is another important facet of the African Muslim society. The local people often seek the help of the marabout to end any crisis they face. The same happened with Nina's father. To solve some issues in his professional life he took refuge in the marabout.

However, the father showed an ambivalent attitude towards the marabout where he is seeking help from the marabout at the same time hiding it from the other people. As the author writes "The fear of being discovered kept him awake till dawn" (52). The apprehension that he showed came from the changing role of the marabout in modern society. People were losing faith on marabouts, their words and their deeds and considered them rather as finaglers than holy man. The marabout charging an awful lot of wealth made the people lose faith in them considering them as mere

money-grubbing marabout. Also, Nina was disturbed when she found out how her father had reached his pockets too often for others in form of charity. In case of her father, his affluency led him to suffer because of which Nina again questions such values that make people suffer: "Money, money...His success had cost him dearly" (68). Another revelation about her father having an illegitimate son came like a bolt from the blue that really made her question as to how close/near she was with her father. She knew nothing about her father's affairs that really made her feel distant from him. The interplay of near and far is best displayed by Nina who was handling all the affairs of her father, be it financial or personal, as someone close to him, yet certain aspects, she was unaware of, made her aloof from her father.

The opacity in her relationship with the father and also with the other family members increased with the discovery of her half siblings and people coming from all over the region asking to repay the debts her father has taken. The loss of her father has left her in a desolate state that filled her with ambiguities. The revelations made Nina to re-evaluate her relationship with father and her family. As the author writes "Like a tree whose roots were destructive tentacles, killing every living thing all around, it had sucked Nina's heart dry and weakened the very foundation of the family" (88). Nina could not accept such behaviour of her father whom she considered as a knowledgeable man who has travelled the world and received western education. Such contradictory standards of her father have put her in an ambivalent condition where she fails to decide which aspect, she should confide in.

She was also growing distant from her relatives who carried on things in her house without her consent. Communal bonding is an integral aspect of African life. Be it death funeral or birth or any other event that take place, people in Africa come together to make it happen. However, Nina, after her return to Abidjan, felt a bit uncomfortable when such bonding intruded into her personal choices. In one instance, her aunts decided to re-decorate the living room, which took Nina by surprise as nobody consulted or asked her opinion on that matter. The narrator states "Nina's heart skipped a beat when she entered the room. No one had asked her opinion. The spectacle saddened her" (38). Instances like this reiterates not only her alienation but how she was growing distant from the traditional practices and customs integral to African society. The 'excessive involvement' of the family members in her father's funeral somehow contradicted Nina's individuality and personal preferences. Individuality and freedom also dictated Nina's relationship with Kangha (her former lover). Their rela-

tionship exhibits cultural disruption, emerging individualistic traits in the minds of the new generation youth and their detachment from the traditional values. As the author writes:

Another thing bothered her: according to tradition, she shouldn't have accepted his invitation. The rules were quite clear: no entertainment until the end of the mourning period. She promised herself her aunts would never find out. (69)

Nina was aware of the customs that one needs to follow during the mourning period. Yet she dares to break it by making love with Kangha. This very action of Nina shows how far she has moved from some of the customary practices that only remained in the memory. Personal fulfilment was placed above social fulfilment. This very inclination towards individuality within Nina and Kangha also led to their splitting up. The lines "Never willing to give up an inch of their freedom, they had treated their emotions like some sort of game, until they had lost everything, including themselves" (70). The importance of freedom and individuality determined the future course of their relationship. Both kangha and Nina's minds were filled with such modern traits that made them suffer. However, Nina was still rooted in her tradition despite being open towards modern cultural values. This attachment to her root compelled her to question the deeds that was not in accordance with the traditional African values. For instance, Nina was guilt ridden thinking about the time she spent with her former lover. It was in the heat of the moment that she decided to meet her lover but afterwards she felt guilty of going against the prescribed customs and felt like she betrayed Frederic, her fiancé. Again, despite all the political and personal conflicts that Nina faced back in her homeland, she manages to resolve them and stays intact with her roots.

Unlike her sister Gabrielle, who distant herself totally from the shackles of filial duties or any sort of attachment towards the roots, Nina struggled to bring together and reconcile the differences and conflicts that exist between her and the outside world. At times she feels jealous seeing her sister free from the ambivalences, doubts, and conflict which Nina lacked. The author writes "She was actually jealous of her determination, of how sure and certain she was in her conviction" (78). For Nina, her conviction was dwindling with the contraries that she discovered about her father that no longer sync with the memories she was holding. She started doubting their parents' relationship, the condition of her mother that left her in a liminal state. However, memories play an important part in culminating that liminal state when she is transported to a world where

her conviction lies.

Memory and Reality

Memory plays a crucial part in the interplay of belonging and unbelonging. With the changed and estranged relation with her family members, it was her memory that gave her a sense of belonging, stability, a home she was searching for. In the case of Nina, there exists only a thin line that separates her memory from reality and which, at times, even overlaps making it difficult to distinguish between past and present. In the start, Nina asks Frédéric a question about what constitutes a home. To this he replies " Yes, memories... the feel of the sky, the taste of the water, the colour of the earth. Faces. Moments of love and loss. A home was all of that" (9). It was her memories that comforted her which is evident when the narrator states "She wondered just how far she would go to keep her memory alive" (22). Nina's struggle to hold onto her memory becomes important because those memories provide her with an alternative space where her sense of being exiled is culminated, and the ambivalences are reconciled. Moreover, the use of memory also brings forth the changing environment that Nina could no longer relate to. However, at times the line that separates memory and reality is blurred. Her memories of the past events run parallel with the present narrative and at times fuse together, blurring the distinctions between memory and reality, thereby providing the character with a dualistic living (Anzaldua 78).

One such episode that best describes distortion of Nina's memory and corporeality is her time with her former lover Kangha. Strolling down the memory lane with the letters she found in her father's room, she remembered Kangha. She recollected her memories with Kangha during her school days and same feeling overpowered her that filled her heart while she was in love with him. Kangha and Nina reunited on her father's funeral and along with the reunion, all the past memory flooded back. When she met him, she realised that the attraction is still there. As the narrator states "Nina could still taste his love, its sweetness, its salt" (70). It seemed that all other memories associated with him turned into reality at the sight of Kangha in the cafe.

The interface was obscured by the confluence of memory and reality which is best described as "Memory no longer dictated her hunger, rather a new desire to both take and give everything at once. A desire so strong she was unable to staunch the flow" (71). Her father's letters, their ancestral home, and certain people from her past became visual representation

of her memories and as such makes it opaque for Nina to see the present reality. Her reality is tampered with the shadow of her memories which further increases her conflict and made the return ambivalent.

Conclusion

Véronique Tadjo, in each chapter, has provided instances that showcase the ambivalent experiences that the protagonist faces after returning home. The above discussion displays Nina's oscillation between 'belonging and unbelonging', 'memory and reality' and 'near and far' which positioned her as a *liminal personae*. The death of her father can be considered as Nina's *rites de passage*. Not only Nina but the society she is inhabiting is also in a transitional phase due to processes like colonisation, globalisation, and civil wars. The extant values are losing its essence at the same time opening doors for newer ones. Describing Abidjan the author writes, "Abidjan began to hide its flaws under layers of makeup; the city withered, lost its innocent radiance. The years stretched on; walls crumbled. The climate grew heavy, foreboding. Heat and humidity drained everyone's energy, blurred their vision" (96). The death of her father, in a way, made her directionless. She was leading a schizophrenic life dwindling between memories and reality and questioning her own deeds. The title of the novel best describes Nina's condition who was losing the centre and her belief after the death of her father. Her liminality was made more complex with the changing traditional practices and customs of the African society along with the changing perspective of the educated elite of the new generation towards such deleterious practices of one's culture.

Nina's exasperation about the overindulgence of the family members into her personal space, her questioning of father's involvement with marabouts and witchcraft brings forth the transition that was sweeping the land. The estranged relationship of her sister with the family also hints at the breakdown of familial values that otherwise play a crucial role in the identification of an individual. Nina's liminality can also be seen in her relationship with the newly discovered half siblings. At first, she is disillusioned and then she felt detached with the discovery of new facts about her father. Such revelations positioned her in an in-between state where she remained indecisive about what to accept and what to reject. A kind of impasse comes over her. She wants to accept them but at the same time becomes hesitant and doubtful. Her indecisiveness often makes her what Mary Douglas calls the 'marginal man'. Substantiating Webster, Douglas writes "To behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal condition" (98). And indeed, there are instances proving Nina's anti-so-

cial behaviour that actually hints at her liminal state. Juwen Zhang in his article "Recovering Meaning" writes "... "marginal man" exists in the minds of all people, not necessarily migrants, and their later generations, who are in changing societies" (134). Nina as a marginal man is situated at the periphery in her own homeland that makes her return journey an ambiguous one.

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