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Memory and Trauma in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

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Abstract

This research investigates memory and trauma in Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. The study uses trauma theory, especially insidious trauma and qualitative textual analysis methodology to probe how the author challenges some previous notions of trauma and displacement in Diasporic African literature. The novel subverts such major themes of the movement in previous works as the transatlantic forced slavery, colonialism and the erroneous partition of Africa, to engage individual and collective strained and disillusioned experiences of its migrants. *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* goes beyond geographical displacement to highlight more on the psychological aftermath of the experience for the exile on arrival to host country. Therefore, one of the findings of this paper is that the narrative underlines the intense feeling of loss caused by one's dislocation from the host, family and nation that disrupts memory and challenges one's identity. It calls for more probing of the subtle experiences of the migrant that has been overlooked to broaden the understanding of the movement.

Keywords: Migration, memory, trauma, exile, displacement, hybridity

Introduction

Trauma is the physical and psychological damage or danger caused by an incident that leaves lifelong critical impact on an individual or a group of people. There are many types of trauma but for the analysis of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears,* this study identifies three types of trauma as essential to the research. They are the classical or the traditional model of trauma that is basically anchored on trauma as event-based popularised by Freud (1955) and modified by Caruth (1996). In her contribution, Caruth asserts that "in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (12).

Caruth places the burden of shock on the specific events, such as "rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents", the reaction of which is often belated, and recurring through flashbacks. While the characters in the text of analysis experienced the trauma responses demonstrated by Caruth, their traumatic experiences in the host nation are not catastrophic or event-based but form part of this study's evaluation. The second type of trauma is insidious trauma propounded by Root (1992); the trauma is the "effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (240). It is effective in the analysis of diasporic African novel like Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, for presenting a protagonist that suffers increasingly daily encounters of subjugation, prejudice, and economic hardship caused by his displacement. While these experiences are not one specific catastrophic incident at a time, their effects are psychologically damaging as a result of their chronic nature.

The third trauma is cultural trauma that occurs when a community's identity is completely changed through a shocking event. Alexander (2004) identifies such incidences to be damaging and downgrade cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs. Cultural

trauma is therefore relevant in this paper's examination of memory and trauma in the text of analysis.

Literature Review

The conceptual framework in this paper's literature review interrogates the interconnectedness of the notions of trauma, memory, displacement, identity, migration and belonging. Displacement is the physical, psychological, social and cultural dispersal from the homeland by an individual or a group. The effects of displacement as migratory experience are feelings of cultural alienation, loss of home, identity disintegration, belonging and unbelonging. The movement may be voluntary or involuntary and the consequence of loss of self, home and cultural identity. The psychological, social, cultural and identity formations involved are additional issues of grave concern other than the physical transition to a new place. These issues arise because of the displacement in form of racial prejudice, economic exclusion, identity split, and cultural, physical and social alienation.

Trauma as the physical and psychological damage or danger caused by an incident leaves lifelong critical impact on an individual or a group of people. Trauma affects the capacity to function physically, psychologically and socially. Experiences of trauma are almost always reproduced in the victim's memory. A traumatic memory compels the victim to experience flashback, repetition, split or dormant reminiscences, painful remembrance of the past or even silence. In fiction, memory enables the interpretation of the narration or suppression of traumatic experiences by characters. The migration can initiate such feelings like homesickness, melancholy, and recollections of family, culture, language, and specific locations. Memory therefore complicates identity which is the compelling pattern of self-actualization and intervention, appropriated by the migrant in navigating issues of integration in the host society and the demands of the homeland. Identity for the migrant can be altered

in several ways including race, gender, nationality, language and culture.

On the other hand, identity instigates the notion of belonging and unbelonging, which is the actual sense of being part of the host and the homeland or the absence. These double senses of identity and connection can come from family, community, nation, culture, religion or the homeland. The migrant is filled with the sense of unbelonging when as an outsider he is excluded from the mainstream of the host society. The underlying effect is the double feeling of alienation arising from the migration, because the migrant is also cut-off from the homeland. His sense of belonging to the homeland is altered by the movement and even on return he is not totally the same (Pnina, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research relies on three literary theories: trauma, postcolonial and African diaspora theories.

Trauma Theory

As steadily developing discipline the application of trauma in literature explores the relationship between fiction, private and collective perspective of trauma such as past and contemporary devastating events. It explores the "merging point of literature and psychiatry via psychology which explores the mystery of man's emerging personality" and is capable of overshadowing other theories (Ogene, 2013:95,103). Freud is the first to direct our attention to literature in the contemplation of trauma's repetition compulsion. Freud relies on Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* in his groundbreaking work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* to illustrate how unsolicited dreams, disintegration of the mind, ideas, and acts essential to traumatic incident are re-enacted. Caruth (1996) observes an underlying significance in Freud's psychoanalytic engagement of literature for illustration through the poetry of Tasso and how it has given direction to the important connection

between literature and trauma theory. Caruth argues that Freud's reliance on literature in the description of traumatic experience underscores how literature and psychoanalysis interrogate intricate nature of being perceptive or not.

Therefore, literature provides robust engagement in trauma's disintegration of the mind because of the speaking voice. She attributes memory with the quality of storing experiences that harbour traumatic remembrance separately. She argues that narrative recollection characterizes typical remembrance. It remains critical for identifying and understanding the past, in the way it was precisely not known in the first instance and returns to haunt the survivor later on.

In addition, memory according to Balaev (2008:149) clarifies traumatic site in literary trauma and constitutes considerable factor that reinforces its outcome. She argues that the location of a traumatic event and recollection, positions a person to isolate and re-evaluate the self in a more general "cultural context", that consist of common principles so as to control the remembrance of the episode. Literature thus becomes a site of trauma for its representational and well-organized plot of an event unavailable to its victim or even the writer. Therefore, this paper explores the ways Dinaw Mengestu presents traumatic memory through diasporic characters because of their migrant status.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory studies the aftermath of European colonization on the history, culture and psychology of former colonized nations. The idea is used to portray the struggle by the former states under the political control of the imperial rulers to regain as well as query history made up by the colonial regime. Theorists like Edward Said, Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha positioned their works at the forefront of recovering the misrepresented past of Africa through their theoretical ideologies. Their works explore the disastrous

effect of colonialism, the alteration caused by the encounter, the pedestrian gaze of the West, and the psychological impact on the people decades after the encounter. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) theorizes that the West appropriated preconceived notion of the East as inferior to launch their imperialist rule based on their presumed superiority.

Homi Bhabha's postcolonial ideology is rooted on the fluidity of cultural identities and shifting forces of power. In *The Location of Power* (1994) he posits that hybridity is the consequence of the amalgamation of the cultures of the colonizer and the natives. Bhabha claims that cultural identities are constantly blending and forceful proving the Western concept of the rigidity of culture wrong. He ultimately propounded the "third space" to be the flexible juncture where culture formation is negotiated.

The psychological and socio-cultural impact of colonialism on Africa is at the core of Franz Fanon's postcolonial theoretical frame in his 1952 and 1961 works, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth.* Through the *Negritude* movement Fanon interrogates French colonial dominance and condescension towards African mentality, culture and language. He argues that the ideal of colonialism is counter-productive for Africans, since the colonial subject suffers cultural, linguistic, historical and identity alienation because of how the colonizers exact compliance to assimilation. *In Back Skin, White Masks* Fanon contends that the colonial subjects' culture and traditional lingo combined to show how they perceive their identity and self-awareness. Although they endeavoured through assimilation to claim white civilization, they are blocked from fully attaining the process as a result of racial intolerance. Thus, his fundamental logic is that the colonial subject including the black man in the West is compelled to put on a mask to be like whites. The masquerading involves the way he talks, the food he eats and the way he speaks the white man's language.

However, the black man in spite of the struggle to be like the white is unsuccessful and is estranged from himself. African diaspora is the voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans and their descendants to various parts of the world. The dispersal started with the slave trade and has been tagged a classic example of "the height of human alienation, and disorientation" affecting a set of people in any history (Gomes 2007:6). African Diaspora theory framework explores the psychological, cultural and historical experiences of people of the continent that are dispersed to other countries especially in the West but still keep in touch with the homeland. At the centre of the theory is displacement, identity negotiation, and cultural hybridity, idea of the homeland, belonging and unbelonging, memory, resistance, survival and trauma.

African Diaspora Theory

The common idea of diaspora is the dispersal of people from their native soil to a foreign land. Therefore, African diaspora is the voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans and their descendants to various parts of the world. The dispersal started with the slave trade and has been tagged a classic example of "the height of human alienation, and disorientation" affecting a set of people in any history (Gomez, 2006:6). The African Diaspora theory framework therefore explores the psychological, cultural and historical experiences of people of the continent, that are dispersed to other countries, especially in the West but still keep in touch with the homeland. At the centre of the theory are the notions of displacement, identity negotiation, and cultural hybridity. Others include the idea of homeland, belonging and unbelonging, memory, resistance, survival and trauma.

Gilroy's (1993) 'double consciousness' premise, introduces black Atlantic communities as hybrid entity through their encounter with Europe. The homeland in his analysis is suppressed as a result of the identity struggle that followed in which the country of origin

remains muted. On the other hand, Okpewho (2009:10-11) who views the presence of African descendants in their host countries as from "old" and new African diaspora" lens, observes that the position of their offspring is uncertain given their "filtered" perspective of the continent. He reasons that the major problem with the younger generation lies in how their admiration for Africa and its ideals are not "indigenously Africa". Rather their perceptions of Africa are inured extensively by the luxurious life and advantage offered by their host.

These different conjectures of African Diasporas' migration experience, identity and cultural hybridity, and the question of home make the theories constructive in the analysis of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. Consequently, trauma, postcolonial and African diaspora theories are useful frameworks in the exploration of memory and trauma in *The beautiful Things that Heaven Bears,* for highlighting the influences of migration on postcolonial subjects, identity negotiation, cultural alienation and racial discrimination.

Empirical Studies

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears as African diasporic novel comes under the contemporary period of globalization. It represents the corpus of works of the continent's diaspora that Mukundi and Williams (2025) argue have succeeded in changing the occurrences of mental injury into locations of imaginative output as well as advancing African sense of restitution. Critics and theorist have come out with various views on these approaches that include the psychological impact of the movement on their characters' psyche among other challenges of the migration. For the 21st century diasporic African literature therefore, trauma's spatial, temporal and textual mobility exposes the illusion behind the migration. Ajibola (2021) claims that the fiction exposes how the migrants' initial idea of the West as powerful and promising, is

dismantled by their in-betweenness and marginalized reality in the homeland and host country.

In "Diasporic Tensions in Selected Postcolonial Novels" Ozoh and Okoye (2019) interrogate several ways African migrants encounter diasporic pressure to determine that the protagonists in Adichie's *Americanah*, Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, Ayi Kwei Amah's *Osiris Rising* and Teju Cole's *Everyday For The Thief*, as African diasporic subjects suffer trauma, displacement, dispossession and identity split. In the same way Hellon Habila's *Travellers* underlines the distressing price of dislocation and the difficulties of beginning afresh in a new place. The central message is defeat, displacement, and how the characters are subjected and shaped by their experiences of trauma as immigrants (Davies, 2023). Keya and Nyambane (2026) in investigating the intersection between forced migration, colonial aggression, culture alienation and fragmented identity, observe that Abdulrazaq Gurnah's *Paradise and Afterlives* present characters who suffer multifaceted displacement leading to trauma. Analyzing how colonial displacement fragments belonging in the texts they argue that displacement in the texts is more than geographical, rather it includes the poignant and mental manoeuvres that cause his characters floating in-between vanished fatherland and uncertain expectations.

Summary

However, the research observes a gap in the critical reviews. Although, the critics identify experiences of trauma as a result of colonialism, race, gender and class. They fail to capture the particular nervous conditions of insidious trauma that describes the everyday experiences of characters. Specific conditions missing include the racial profiling that is subtle but damaging to the psyche and the fragmented space and time. This fills the gap by analysing Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*,

present characters whose identity split and fragmentation constitute the insidious traumatic experiences of migration.

Research Methodology

In the study on memory and trauma in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* this paper applies the qualitative research method. It easily clarifies difficult incidents that present valuable and different angles to the traumatic experiences of the protagonist. A qualitative research method enables the researcher present her analysis technique expressively rather than numerically. These include the interpretation of both conscious and unconscious attitudes that motivate the lived experiences of characters in the text.

Memory and Trauma in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

Dinaw Mengestu in this text captures the Ethiopian politics that give rise to exilic situations and the psychological effect on Sepha the protagonist. In Sepha and other characters he projects the mental injury of the displacement caused by their experiences of racial isolation in the host country. These compound their feelings of segregation and constant yearning for belonging and identity. Mengestu through his protagonist offers alternative narrative and voice suppressed by representative dialogue in the regime of the Red Terror. Sepha's original trauma of displacement is traced to Ethiopia's political unrest supported by the activities of the Red Terror, a political formation of Mengistu Haile Mariam in order to eliminate opposition in 1976. Sepha's father is caught in the web of the violent revolution against loyalists of the ousted government of Haile Selassia on 12th September 1974.

To save his son, the father gave himself up as the author of a pamphlet written by Sepha. As his father is arrested and killed the family through underground routes sends him to America. His

disillusionment in America compounds his sense of dislocation from his past which intensifies his feeling of alienation.
In the early days of his arrival in America, Sepha suffers the mistrust of the American society against African migrants. The manager of the Capital Hotel where his uncle got him a job doubts his ability to speak English. The manager expresses other misgivings including his capacity to lift heavy objects and his honesty in order to prevent pilfering. This profiling of the African migrants as misfits psychologically affects Sepha and his uncle Berhane. Thus, Sepha's enactment of the memory of the events of his past and ongoing trauma throughout the narration represents the shock that prevents him from fully knowing the experience.

They constitute the incongruous source of his recurrent nightmares. Sepha's unconscious movement from one episode of the events to the other is fore grounded in images of death, privileges and despair. His acute intrusive memories, especially the memory of his insidious trauma, Ethiopia and his family influences his identity and worldview. As he sits in his store or walks around the city, his mind is often taken back to Ethiopia and his experiences there. He is filled with the thought of home even when he tries to find a way to fit into in the American society. He never forgets Ethiopia, the beautiful and bad experiences he had. Mengestu appropriates memory to help the reader come to grips with the extent of his loss.

Thus, Sepha's experience of homelessness does not necessarily come from his removal from his home country Ethiopia, rather it stems from his loss of a sense of home, community, stability and safety. These feelings are reinforced by the racial prejudices of the American society that prevent him from settling down as one of them. These situations so displace his deep-seated tie to a secure location, community and identity that he is consumed by the susceptibility to physically and mentally wander. Even though America provides him the physically needed safety and home, he

is relentlessly searching for the same sense of home Ethiopia provided. His stay in Washington D.C reveals several dimensions of social and cultural alienation which heighten his coping mechanisms that include reading and wandering the city. As he jaunts through Logan Circle to P Street, Rhodes Island Avenue, Vermont Avenue, Dupont Circle and Georgetown either by foot, train or bus, Sepha is conscious of his not belonging to either of the parts.

Indeed, memory's dual effect shapes and complicates Sepha's exilic identity in the manner it provides attachment to the past that unsettles his present. The social and political realities of his existence and that of the Ethiopian community are tied to their national tragedy. Thus, they consist of other victims of the revolution like Berhane, who occupy twenty six out of the twenty eight floors in a building. For Berhane and the other migrants of Silver Rock, assimilating American culture equals to polluting ideals and culture of the homeland. They are determined to preserve their culture which breeds friction because of the hybridity it creates.

Sepha notes how every corner bears the imprint of the homeland with the "smell of *wat*, coffee and incense" pervading the corridors. He is forced to move out of the place because of the rigidity in the practice of the traditions of the homeland. While he is oppressed by the "insular" nature of the place and the memory it sets off, Berhane finds solace in its familiarity and the sense of security of a home it provides. Within the apartment buildings Amharic is used and "hardly a word of English is spoken" (116), the older women behave as if they are walking the streets of Addis. Relationships among the young people are controlled by parents while close-knit family members live together and gossiping thrives unchecked. Sepha's reaction to the place exposes the tension in adaptation from the past to the present. Both are

convoluted in their loyalty to the homeland, integration struggles and identity formation in America.

Even though there is connection between his personal memories and that of the others in the collective cultural norms practiced by members of the Ethiopian community, Sepha mocks their little efforts. He sees their ease of life and continuation of a semblance of their past life as a sign of betrayal and defeat. Moreover, in spite of the restrictions imposed on the young people in order to sustain Ethiopian culture and identity, there are adverse changes that "all amounts to one proof a vanishing culture" (118). The youngsters indulge in drug use, and take bold steps like their American counterparts to date openly. The hybridity is a phenomenon that one woman predicts with time "there won't be any Ethiopians.

They'll all become Americans." The community's stricture on culture echoes Said's (1994:15) assertion that "cultures" are configurations of human beings to influence, contribute, and are generous to the beliefs contained. Said further declares that while cultures integrate, and authenticate, they are a little unkind in what they prohibit and devalue. In their resolve to protect the Ethiopian way of life, characters in Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* who have succeeded in forming a little Ethiopia in Silver Rock, are blind to the reality of the alterations in the lifestyle.

Sepha's intense emotional and physical pursuit for social integration, security and a place to call home imposes various identity formations. Perhaps, it is in his identity as a student that Sepha gains the confidence that eludes him as a migrant. He confesses that being a student compensates for his loss of identity and bestows on him a "complete identity" he is proud to possess. The status gives him a sense tied to the academic community "in the absence of a family, a home, friends, and a country" (98). The word 'student' represents a force that is equivalent to belonging to a nation. Accordingly, education elevates his exilic status thereby

turning a once gloomy identity into a thing of pride for Sepha, his family and friends. He observes how the identity overshadows the primary plan of the immigrant which is to continue to exist. This is replaced by the euphoria of the "accomplishment of a long waited dream and the general ambition of life". However, this identity did not protect his pathological sense of wandering nor heal his psychological wound.

As trauma draws the mind to the place of a traumatic incident, Sepha's mind as a student is always drawn to the insidious encounters of discrimination he is experiencing in America. He remembers how he is constantly confronted by other students for answers to the news of famine, war and "images of starving children with bloated bellies" in Ethiopia. He realizes that he is incapacitated and uninformed about situations in the homeland as his inquisitive audience. The nervousness he gets from the student identity drives him to his first sole decision to abandon school and move to another location. The move to Logan Circle to open his store gives Sepha so much expectation that he is more and more disenchanted with the unrealized dreams as the years go by.

The encouragement and contributions of his friends, Joseph and Kenneth boosted his decision. Sepha remembers their early reaction when he informed them of his plans and how they invested their time in actualizing them. He recalls how Joseph praised his initiative and predicted it would give them all the opportunity to experience the first-class treatment they render to others as bellhops such as carrying bags for guests. Kenneth on the other hand first suggested the store as the only means to get ahead. He pushes Sepha to "be your own boss" as the only way to survive in America.

Therefore, the failure of the store is a collective burden all three carry; it underscores their individual and collective failure several years after it was opened. Sepha is saddened by the memories of

their beginning as valets, their first night in the store when their ideas were grand and their ambition for the world only limited by imagination. In the present, their condition shows little improvement with all their dreams unfulfilled. Joseph is still serving in a hotel without realizing his vision of acquiring a college degree from the University of Michigan. While Kenneth succeeds in graduating as an engineer, he still lives on the margin of the society with no improvement in his finances. Even his plans of going back to Africa is truncated, and now Sepha notices how he has changed from the self-assured ambitious young migrant to a sceptic living in a big scarcely "furnished" home. Sepha is pained by how a lonely and poor picture of dejection he presents on the day he caught Kenneth soliloquising in the dark "all of this would come years later of course, leaving that first night in the store sit and burn in my memory" (146). The trio never really achieved the self-actualisation that they expected in spite of the efforts they put in individually and collectively

The eviction embodies a critical traumatic crisis for the black majority and Sepha who represents a racialized group even among blacks. He has witnessed traumatizing events in America through racial profiling, discrimination and other subtle ongoing treatment. In Logan Circle he is in the minority as an African migrant in the midst of black majority. At the altercation with police he is made to know his place by the attitude of the Black-American residents, especially Mrs. Davis. While it introduces element of displacement for the black majority, it heightens Sepha's instability and identity crisis. He is particularly affected by the arrival of the new privileged tenants who displaced his original customers and withhold their patronage from his store. While ordinarily their arrival is expected to be enriching to Sepha, he laments the worsening poverty the situation imposes on him. He laments "with exception, though of a few things here and there-trash bags, laundry detergent, candy bars, and of course bottle water-most of these people wanted nothing to do with my little run-down store"

(190). The eviction symbolizes the systemic oppression and traumatic experiences of blacks in America.

Sepha presents fragmented memories of the events that set off his displacement throughout the narration. The retelling is done in no particular order and the fragmentation is the consequences of the traumatic devastation that prevents him from fully owning the experiences in the first instances. These incidents paradoxically necessitate his experiences of recurrent nightmares, nostalgia, psychosis and flashbacks that affect his wellbeing. Thus, displacement alters not just the mental but physical outlook Sepha because of the pressure the migration mounts on him. He suffers economic insecurity and discrimination that affect him mentally and physically. Sepha observe this in the nostalgic reflections on how the displacement alters his physical appearance.

The stress of fighting for survival in America takes negative effect in both his mind and body. Sepha's reflection in the mirror reminds him of the toll of his poor and unsettled state, heightened by his plane looks, aged and unremarkable life. That was the day he realised that his old self has vanished. The strain of the situation sets in motion a profound sense of unbelonging that has plagued his experience in America. After seventeen years of waiting impermanence becomes permanent, the homeland develops into a distance impossible to bridge, and years of emotional mourning give way to identity shift. Sepha's defining moment of realization that he is not going back to Ethiopia came after the accumulation of the above events. Sepha's moment of realization came when he stopped placing physical attachment to the memories of homeland and resorts to freezing them in his memory. The possibility of physical and emotional return to Ethiopia becomes impossible as his persistent doubt, continuous melancholy and the recognition that his past life and home may not be same.

Therefore, to be rooted Sepha finally decides to make Logan Circle a home. He is no long clinging to the idea of a return to the

homeland but is absolutely clear of the image of a place to call home. This decision as his other plans is delivered in his own words "I am going back home" which signify his literal exiting from the Colonial Grill to Logan Circle into the figurative exiting from Ethiopia to America. As he leaves the Colonial Grill after seeing Joseph, he realizes that the Logan Circle is a space of security, tradition and community. It becomes a sp[ace where dreams can germinate and not buried, Sepha in the end sees a possibility of a new start in Logan Circle, from waiting to living in the existing certainty it presents.

Conclusion

This paper's interrogation is on the structural conditions that produce trauma on arrival and identifying how it constitutes the everyday experiences of characters. Mengestu moves from event-based psyche split to present characters whose traumas and displacement are insidious, suppressive and continuing. Mengestu problematizes memory and nostalgia in the discourse of these lived experiences of migration. The paper identifies that the most constant memories are the ongoing discrimination experiences by the host, the homeland and the wish to return, the challenge this throws up for the migrant. Thus, it is the position of this paper that diasporic African literature needs to be re-interrogated, to widen the understanding of how insidious trauma because of its understated nature, initiates such feelings of homesickness, melancholy, and memories of family, culture and language.

The study proposes more awareness to be given to Maria Root's all-inclusive "insidious trauma". Examining African diasporic literature on the Eurocentric traditional form of trauma as event-based will not tackle the problems of race and other composite types of subtle ongoing dominance. Directing focus completely on events like Mengestu's account of the Ethiopian revolution will not have captured Sepha's thinly veiled everyday experiences of racial oppression that heightens his sense of unbelonging.

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