

The Nigerian Coming-of-Age Novel as a Globalization Device: A Reading of Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

Sita Maria Kattaneke

Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany

Abstract

Since its initial appearance in 2004, Chris Abani's novel *GraceLand* has been read in the context of post-colonial fiction and as a lamentation on the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. The Nigerian coming-of-age story, however, actively questions this perspective and shows it to be an oversimplification: The novel speaks of global concerns but also of shared guilt. The author shows an amalgamation of African shortcomings and Western meddling to raise an awareness of the complexity of contemporary problems in Nigeria within the context of a globalised world.

[**Keywords:** *GraceLand*, Nigeria, Fiction, globalisation, postcolonialism]

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' [...]
That was the perfect description of life in Lagos, he thought.

GraceLand

GraceLand (2004) is Chris Abani's second novel. Born in Nigeria, Abani published several works as a young man for which he suffered severe political persecution, more than once being sent to prison. In 1991 Abani left his mother country and sought refuge abroad. While in exile he quickly gained a Western audience. Having lived several years in England, he immigrated to the United States in 1999 and became professor for creative writing at the University of California, Riverside. In this sense, Abani belongs to the third generation of Nigerian authors, whom Waberi also calls "children of the postcolony" (1998: 8) and whose writings have become an integral part of today's publishing market. Abani's novel "interpolate[s] Western and Nigerian themes" to convey his "perspective on Nigerian culture in the context of neocolonialism, multiculturalism and globalization" (Sereda 2008: 32). Noteworthy is that *GraceLand* is a polyphonous novel that actively questions Western authority to know globalised Africa. The plurality of resources Abani employs rejects a one-dimensional and uniform world-view, offering instead a complex picture of 20th-century globalised Africa.

The novel is set in Nigeria and parallels to Abani's own experiences are evident in the story of Elvis Oke, who grows up seeing one military coup come close on the heels of another, later moving with his father to one of the slums in Lagos City where Elvis is imprisoned. As in his earlier poems, Abani uses the storyline of *GraceLand* to make a strong political statement: from the very beginning, Elvis' upbringing is marked by harrowing events and traumatic experiences that display Nigerian reality from the perspective of the oppressed.

Weaving its way back and forth between the years 1972 and 1983, the novel spans a timeframe in which Nigeria finds itself “teetering between corrupt democratic rule and oppressive military dictatorship” (Sereda 2008: 33). Afikpo is the village of Elvis Oke’s childhood and a place of sweet memories – memories of his deceased mother, his grandmother’s cooking and his sexual awakening. The village presents a world of Igbo tradition and family life, of cooking and gardening, and of childhood dreams. However, it is also a place of disillusion: Western civilization has found its way into the village, showing how global politics have affected local thinking. Many of the old Igbo rituals have lost their foundation, having “been streamlined for the convenience of modern life” (Etter-Lewis 2010: 169). Family bonds become fragile and the men vehemently defend old patriarchal structures that include honour killings, leading to an increase in violence towards women and children. Both Elvis and his cousin Efua are abused by an uncle while the family remains silent, making the village look anything but the harmonious antipode of turbulent Lagos City that the novel seems to suggest. On the contrary, many chapters hint at the fact that Igbo society is deeply fractured. Slave trade, colonisation and the missionaries’ work has left a deep mark on the traditional self-understanding of the Igbo people. “Christian prayers have been added, and Jesus has replaced Obasi as the central deity” (Abani 2004: 291) leaving the native inhabitants in an in-between situation. Elvis grows up in surroundings where opposing cultural influences clash – and often for the worst reflecting many of the tensions at work on the African continent. Much of what Elvis experiences involves violence because Nigeria’s history is rife with conflict and unrest:

[T]here was the violence of colonial occupation itself. Intertribal wars and conflagration. All of this stuff building up to a society that had just come through a civil war...(Vida 2005: 23)

When Elvis is eight his mother dies, leaving him to be raised by his father, an unemployed alcoholic with unsuccessful political ambitions. Together they move to the swampy city of Lagos where life in the slums awaits them. Maroko, the place to which Elvis and his father move, is home to a poverty- and crime-stricken community virtually drowning in garbage and mud and geographically set apart from Lagos City, with its beach areas populated by the rich. The setting Abani chooses can easily be traced on a map of Lagos State. The shanty town of Maroko or Makoko was situated in the 80s on Victoria Island opposite the lagoon such that the opulent skyline of Lagos City where foreign investors live was prominently visible to the real and the fictive slum dwellers. In such close proximity, tensions are inevitable:

[H]e stared at the city, half slum, half paradise. How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? he wondered. He hadn’t known about the poverty and violence of Lagos until he arrived. It was as if people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around its unsavoury parts. (Abani 2004: 7)

The distant shore presents the vision of an altogether different world, so that first and third world are separated virtually only by the lagoon. Full of illusions about what life in the city might be like, Elvis tries to make a living as a dancer, impersonating his idol Elvis Presley for the wealthy tourists that occupy the beaches. With a black wig on his head and his face covered in talcum powder, he performs beautifully fluid movements, but for the “pink expatriates baking slowly in the sun” (Abani 2004: 260) he remains a beggar. “He doesn’t look like any Elvis I know” (Abani 2004: 12) is the usual response. An artist whom Elvis befriends confides in him that nowadays “nobody really appreciated the skill required

to take years of abuse and turn it into amazingly beautiful melodies” (Abani 2004: 275). In his second job as a private dancer for rich Indian and Lebanese customers Elvis earns more money but is treated like a bond-slave:

You are dere to keep dem entertained, no more, no less. [...] You are disposable and dey will never care about you. Dey will go on to marry rich foreigners like demselves. [...] De best you can hope for is to make a decent living while things last and maybe get in a good fuck or two – for which you must charge extra. (Abani 2004: 95)

The degradation that Elvis experiences turns out to be the rule rather than the exception when he observes life in postcolonial Africa. Everywhere around him people try to eke out a living – labouring for the rich, thieving or selling their bodies. Most of them are “treated badly by de authorities”, “pay high taxes”, “get low wages, poor accommodation” and “no clean water” (Abani 2004: 254). Elvis' father Sunday Oke becomes the embodiment of this forfeited life. Disillusioned, broken and unable to support his son, he gives himself over to excessive drinking.

Describing Global Economics

With no male relative as a guide, Elvis befriends with two figures whose names symbolize different ways of surviving in Lagos. The first one is Caesar Augustus Anyanwu, called the King of Beggars, a politically active intellectual who is willing to sacrifice his honour (c. Abani 2004: 31) in order to topple the military regime that he considers to be corrupt. His political conviction springs from a personal insight into the economic interrelations that are responsible for Nigeria's misery. The other figure is Redemption, an orphaned boy who ruthlessly pursues any means of turning his misery into fortune. “Redemption walks the dangerous road of employing clandestine, half-legal tactics in order to carve out a habitable space of survival” (Nnodim 2008: 324). Redemption, who has always enough money to pay rent, food and entertainment, is involved in shady business such as drug trafficking. In contrast to the King of Beggars who wants to educate Elvis and turn him into a freethinker, Redemption offers more practical advice. Redemption is only a few years senior to Elvis but life on the fringes of a criminal society has turned him into a hard-boiled survivor. He tells Elvis that if he wants to become rich, he needs to “think like a millionaire” (Abani 2004: 54) – which means to think like a “Hustler? Survivor? Yes” (Abani 2004: 308). Eventually Elvis is enticed by his peer's life to the other side of the law. It is this decision that transforms the street performer and gigolo into the drug runner and eventually human organ distributor (c. Etter-Lewis 2010: 175).

Throughout his journey to manhood Elvis must contend with global concerns such as poverty and economic exploitation. In the novel commodification of the body is presented in several forms. The most obvious is prostitution. Small girls that should spent their weekdays at school but instead work on the street selling food supplement their income by “let[ting] male customers feel [their] firm breasts for a small fee” (Abani 2004: 307). Without protection of the family many of them are raped. Other forms of commodification become visible when Elvis' friend Okon explains that he sells his blood to hospitals that offer one hundred Naira per pint. The compensation is high enough for Elvis to consider making a donation himself but he is spared by Redemption who offers him a job escorting a transport to Togo. The van they are to accompany contains a “bunch of kids, boys and girls, ranging in age from about eight to sixteen” (Abani 2004: 232), all handcuffed. The children are said to be runaways to be returned to their parents – an explanation which convinces

neither Elvis nor Redemption:

Well, maybe slavery. Slavery? Who still buy slaves? Plenty people. Des children can become prostitute in European country or even for Far East... (Abani 2004: 236)

However, this matter-of-fact estimation turns into a horrific euphemism: the cooling boxes the kids sit on contain six human heads on a pile of ice; another holds organs such as hearts and livers packed in ice (237). Shocked by this discovery, Elvis gradually becomes aware that he has aided in the trade of spare parts. Redemption's monologue is unquestionably the novel's climax, showing the stark reality of African life:

Spare human parts. For organ transplant. [...] American hospitals do plenty organ transplant. But dey are not always finding the parts on time to save people life. So certain people in Saudi Arabia/and such a place used to buy organ parts and sell to rich white people so dey can save their children or wife or demselves. [...] Anyway, de rich whites buy de spare parts from de Arabs who buy from wherever dey can. [...] Human head fetch ten thousand dollars. [...] Dey can use de eyes and also something dey call stem cells. Anyway, heart is also ten thousand. De oders, like kidney, are like three to ten thousand dollars. It is big money. [...] Well, as I hear, dere is too much damage to de organ as [...] /de harvest dem. Also, not all survive de journey. So many of de parts are thrown away. [...] dose children will arrive in Saudi alive, den, depend on de demand, dey will harvest de parts from dem. Fresh, no damage, more money for all of dem. (Abani 2004: 241 ff.)

In a country where people can disappear without a trace, are neither registered as residents nor have birth certificates, human organ trafficking is big business. One major supplier of such illicit goods is the military who is charged with protecting the nation. Seeing the chance for easy profit, certain segments of the armed forces engage enthusiastically in the smuggling of organs with prisons, refugee camps or war zones being the perfect source. The Colonel in particular "is a figure who embodies armed domination, the law's arbitrary and unequal application and globalization" (Sereda 2008: 43). Within the global trade he is a pivotal figure linking offer and demand, first and third world. Culture, goods and tourists go one way; a cheap work force, natural and human resources the other. The image of the sedated children is a stirring condemnation of this globalization that unites Western countries and corrupt military dictatorships in their combined effort to exploit Nigerians for personal gain.

While Elvis is haunted by the memory of the transport, Redemption wants to free him from blame: "No forget de whites who create de demand" (Abani 2004: 243). Certainly both sides, Western market and African middlemen, benefit from the neo-colonial situation which reduces human beings to the monetary value of their organs. For Elvis this interconnectedness comes as a shock. It is only later that he finds out that organ trafficking is rampant in his country. His friend Okon collects corpses from the roadside to sell them for organ transplants (Abani 2004: 308). The financial incentive seems to outweigh the moral dilemma involved. "I know [...] It is bad for a man's soul, waiting at roadside like vulture, for someone to die, so you can steal fresh corpse, but man must survive" (Abani 2004: 308). Okon is convinced that pride is something only rich people can afford (c. Abani 2004: 31) and that organ snatching at least "help[s] to save lives" (Abani 2004: 76). The lives in question undoubtedly belong to people of greater means than Okon, who lives hand-to-mouth. The troubling implication of this free flow of goods is clearly delineated when Okon admits that living people are demanded as well. "This moment in the novel illustrates the

traumatic interpenetration of cultures in an unevenly globalized world. [...] African themselves become the latest natural resource exported to the West [...] this time in silent fragmented pieces” (Novak 2008: 42). The demand of goods created in the West renders people in poorer countries little more than lumps of meat. The characters in *GraceLand* see little choice but to accept the status quo – they live without questioning the system that makes people disown their bodies: “no be sleazy thing, na practical thing – like feeding goat or tending chicken” (Abani 2004: 29). Their healthy human bodies have no intrinsic value. Only the mutilated and disassembled body becomes an added value in the value creation process.

Within the cosmos of misery that is described in *GraceLand*, body commodification is just a tiny element but it hits a Western audience where it hurts most: at our humanistic sense of being more than our body. Yet the conflict is not resolved within the novel, which refuses to provide any simple resolution concerning the sedated children. For them there is no hope that anyone will put a stop to the traffickers’ game. Neither Elvis nor Redemption achieves any sort of poetic justice. In their “unstable state of being retarded by a complex intersection of poverty, violence, displacement and unrealised dreams” (Etter-Lewis 2010: 160) the smuggling episode is soon to fade from memory. Within the reader’s mind, however, it persists. From a reader-oriented perspective this lack of resolution is highly interesting and differentiates *GraceLand* from many other works dealing with body commodification where the demarcation line between good and evil is re-established and a solution is found by the end of the story. Abani, however, employs a very different but effective literary device: he explicitly addresses his Western audience: “if your only child dey die, you go ask question?” (Abani 2005: 243). With this simple question the vicious circle is mapped out.

What seems particularly valuable for a study of literary representations of globalization is that Abani presents a situation that bears much resemblance to the exploitation of the African continent during the slave trade. “Indebtedness is [...] the system that ties modern globalization to its more obviously condemnable precursors [...]. The social, political, and economic conditions presented in the novel are disturbingly analogous to the conditions impelling the slave trade” and that “created situations in which individuals were forced to capture and sell off their neighbors” (Hendrick 2010: 84). In order to have food and money to pay the rent Elvis and Redemption participate in a trade in which only non-Africans benefit on the long run. In *GraceLand* there is “no end to colonialism, only a transformation of US and European policies and methods. Conquest and slavery are replaced by the creation of a market” (Novak 2008: 35) in living resources that relies on the gap between rich and poor.

Language of Globalization

Similar to the novel’s content, which deals with global issues, Abani reveals with his choice of language problems of globalization. Each space is filled with norms, expectations and conceptions of what constitutes normal language use and what does not. The cultural elite in Nigeria is faced with a dilemma: In this African country of approximately 130 million inhabitants, an estimated 505 languages (c. Gut 2008: 35) are spoken. Most of them are peripheral languages within the world languages system (c. de Swaan 2010: 56). This means that many people are bilingual but still find “their linguistic resources to be of very low value” (Blommaert 2010: 3). English as a hypercentral language is present everywhere. It is the code “associated with core values of capitalist ideas of success” (Blommaert 2010: 189)

and often been considered as the official language “although there is no government statute or decree specifying this” (Gut 2008: 35). Despite its pragmatic advantages, English is still highly stigmatized. It is the language of colonialism and associated with the country’s violent alienation from its African roots. The exploitation of the African continent by the West and the white man’s arrogance towards indigenous culture frequently linger in the background.

Considering the multifarious linguistic landscape, Nigerian writers must choose between adopting the culturally ubiquitous English, often a second language for them, or adhering to their less pervasive native tongue. The ‘cosmopolitan strategy’ often brings recognition from a world-wide audience while a work written in an indigenous language might be more authentic but speaks to a more restricted readership. Abram de Swaan, international economics expert, argues: “From an individual perspective, it is entirely rational for people to opt for the language with the larger *Q*-value” (2010: 67). Some critics argue that the price writers such as Abani must pay for this is, at least to a certain degree, a cultural uniformisation. However, the actual composition of Abani’s texts casts doubt on this conviction. The following chapter will explore how the ideological inheritance of English colonialism in post-colonial Nigerian literature such as *GraceLand* has been transformed in communicative practices that allow for the emergence of “new identities, which are neither colonial-global, nor necessarily indigenous-local” (Bhatt 2010: 520).

Abani uses English as linguistic medium and yet creates within his novel linguistic hybridity that includes devices such as code-switching, inclusion of indigenous metaphors and idioms, use of neologisms, syntactic fusion and culturally dependent speech styles, insertion of foreign lexical items and mixing of local vernacular varieties such as dialects with standard – all of them making the movement between global and local more manageable. A prominent feature is the use of Nigerian Pidgin which reflects the fragmented environment of his protagonists. In official contexts in Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin is still highly stigmatized as a bastard language of the uneducated people. Other than that, borrowings from African languages occur frequently in the novel. The decision to transpose Igbo or Hausa into the fictional work is stylistically noteworthy in that sense that the intermittent appearance of foreign words emphasises that those living in Lagos are “torn between their language and the British or American standards” (Mair 1992: 119). Relative to the novel's length, the number of deviations from Standard English is limited. Those elements, however, perform a symbolic function.

Refashioning the Discourse in a Heteroglossic Image

The fusion of foreign and known can also be traced on other levels of the novel. Similar to its use of language, the novel's structure illustrates the extent to which Elvis and his friends are torn between different cultures. Each chapter begins with a description of the Igbo kola nut ritual revealing core values of the African tribe. In the passages that follow the ritual is explained “for emphasis and clarity” from a non-African perspective (Sereda 2008: 37). The variations between the two descriptions are significant as they demonstrate “how alternative discourses and signifying systems record reality differently” (Novak 2008: 44). After this proverbial introduction the narrative sets in, each chapter concluding with an excerpt from Elvis’ mother’s journal, usually a traditional recipe or memorandum of botanical knowledge. Alan Waterman writes that this AABA-structure could be related to “the rhetorical structure of Yoruba proverbs” (1990: 58). Especially noteworthy is the fact that the fusion of Yoruban structure, Igbo ritual and Western explanation enables Abani to “surpass binary dialectics” (Sereda 2008: 45) – quite apart from the content itself. To apply

the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, *GraceLand* is neither 'Self' nor 'Other' but depends on a multiplicity of voices entering into a conversation on contemporary Nigeria (c. Bhabha 1990: 320).

Within each narrative sequence (B) the clear delineation of the different perspectives is blurred in favour of an amalgamation of the multiple cultural influences present in Elvis' life. American pop songs, buka food, European literature, Igbo recipes, Western movies and the Koran are built into a pastiche that resists uniformity. Together with his friends "Elvis participates in the global flows of culture" (Nnodim 2008: 324).

The cross-fertilization between different languages and different narrative pieces has yet another implication: the constant shifting between the novel's different components, the movement between time and space and the clash of civilizations is an expression of Elvis' lack of orientation and the feeling of dislocation. Life in Lagos, "a dystopian space of deprivation, [and] despair" (Nnodim 2008: 321), and the different cultural influences present in Nigeria make his growing-up a very unstable experience. Elvis cannot look to the people and customs of the past in order to cope with the neo-colonial situation because many of the Igbos are unwilling to contemplate their traditions. Western culture seems to offer more desirable role models. Therefore Elvis performs "mimicry and simulation" (Nnodim 2008: 324) but he does not find his true identity. Novels, movies and songs all confirm a white subjectivity (Fanon 1967: 147). The resulting sense of confusion is best shown in his ritual of dressing up – a recurrent act throughout the novel. "With a defeated sigh, he turned to the small tin of talcum powder stuck in one of the pockets in his bag. He shook out a handful and applied a thick layer, peering into the mirror. He was dissatisfied; this was not how white people looked" (Abani 2004: 78). According to this quote, *GraceLand* has been read in the context of post-colonial fiction and as a lamentation on the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. However, *GraceLand* actively questions this perspective and shows it to be an oversimplification: "Abani problematizes the situation by positing non-African influences as both destructive agents and as mechanisms for liberation" (Hendrick 2010: 75). The novel speaks of global concerns but also of shared guilt: No matter whether Elvis witnesses a man committing suicide, his cousin Efua being raped or the sedated children being smuggled to Togo, he is unable to do more than watch: He lacks agency. And it is this lack of self-determination that makes him also participate in the worst of all manifestations of globalised trade. Hendrick observes that men like Elvis "define right and wrong as instances of situational justification rather than an overarching moral code" (2010: 82). Elvis is certainly a victim of globalisation but the claim that he comes "through the experience with his kindness and compassion intact" (Dike 2008: 28) can be invalidated by a close reading that reveals his emotional numbness – a character trait that he is well aware of when he reprimands himself for "suffering from colonial mentality" (Abani 2004: 78). In this sense, the novel shows an amalgamation of African shortcomings and Western meddling to raise an awareness of the complexity of contemporary problems in Nigeria within the context of a globalised world.

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Sita Maria Kattanek is a PhD Candidate at the University of Freiburg. She attended University of Auckland, New Zealand on DAAD-Scholarship, Shakespeare Summer School, Cambridge, Great Britain and Universitat de Barcelona, Spain on Sokrates Scholarship. She is interested in ballet photography, literature and travelling.
