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Memory, Migration and the Politics of Return: A Postcolonial Reading of Michael Donkor's *Hold*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the diasporic legacies of African migration and its impact on the construction of identity in Black British literature. With special reference to Michael Donkor's novel *Hold* (2018), the paper examines the impact of colonial legacies in the construction of identity. The narrative focuses on Belinda, a Ghanaian housemaid living in Britain, whose life of servitude echoes the exploitative labour systems of colonial exchange. Amma, whose queer preferences are pathologized and labelled un-African, Nana, the traditional mother, whose adherence to tradition belies her own past experiences, and Mary, whose rootedness serves as a foil to diasporic anxieties, are other significant characters in the novel. This study seeks to analyse the characters' experiences of return, retreat and rootedness in order to historically situate the themes of belonging and cultural assimilation in the lives of the African diaspora. Drawing on postcolonial theory, this paper examines how *Hold* interrogates themes of race, class and gender and the inherent inequalities that shape diasporic life. By linking the characters' personal struggles to the weight of history, the study highlights how colonial legacies shape modern diasporic identity. The paper also looks at how diasporic women resist gender norms and patriarchal policing, and reclaim collective memory, thereby exerting agency.

Keywords: *Agency, colonialism, diaspora, gender, identity, memory, migration, return*.

Introduction

The word "diaspora" is used to refer to "migrants who settle in distant lands and produce new generations, all the while maintaining ties with and making occasional visits to each other and their homeland" (Manning 2). By the time African and Caribbean countries gained independence, black people from these countries as well as the United States came to the political forefront, resulting in a renewed interest in connecting to people of African descent

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across the world (Manning 3). The African diaspora in the United Kingdom has evolved through successive migrations that started as far back as the 16th century. Miranda Kaufmann in her book Black Tudors: The Untold Story asserts that Africans were present in England "as far back as the courts of Henrys I and II, Elizabeth I and James I" (Boakye). Nevertheless, it was the arrival of the Windrush generation in the English soil in 1948 that marked the beginning of complex negotiations of identity and belonging that characterize diasporic contexts. Although the 1948 influx was considered symbolic of post-war reconstruction and mutual friendship between the countries involved, underlying tensions that resulted from the colonizer-colonized binary went unresolved. Subsequent waves of African migration to the UK have enriched the latter's cultural landscape and economy, yet the tensions of systemic racial discrimination and deep-seated racial prejudices have continued to characterize the lives of African diaspora in Britain.

Michael Donkor's *Hold* (2018) frames a poignant narrative that links colonial histories and identity construction through the lives of its female characters. Belinda, a Ghanaian housemaid displaced to Britain, navigates life through constant negotiations with past and present and a troubled relationship with herself as she confronts issues relating to class, race and gender. Amma, a girl born and brought up in a traditional Ghanaian household in Britain, struggles to locate herself between Britain and Ghana and the values supposedly attached to these countries. Nana, Amma's mother, is a traditional Ghanaian who tries to impose a traditional African way of life upon herself and her daughter, but fails miserably. Mary is Belinda's friend who, despite staying in Ghana throughout, casts a major influence in charting the diasporic experiences of the other characters. Belinda's mother, who acquires a symbolic status as she exists only in Belinda's memory, also contributes to the discussions on the ongoing impact of colonial histories on the construction of diasporic identity. An analysis of the characters of the novel throws light upon the questions of tradition, culture, home, nation, gender and race that permeate diasporic lives and highlights the plurality of diasporic female experience.

Colonial Afterlives and Gendered Subjectivities

Postcolonial feminism has initiated an attempt "to recover whole cultures of women heretofore ignored or marginalized - women who speak not only from colonised places but also from the colonising places to which, many of them fled" (Mathew 42). In *Hold*, while Belinda's viewpoint is that of a Ghanaian migrant staying in Britain, Nana's viewpoint is that of a first-

generation immigrant trying to find and establish her roots in a distant land, and Amma's is that of a second-generation immigrant who is caught between Britain and Ghana. Although Mary is a minor character, she complicates the intersection of the hitherto mentioned viewpoints.

Born in a Ghanaian village and taken to Britain as a housemaid, Belinda is supposedly a traditionalist who values African culture. Nana, who considers her daughter Amma's sexual preferences abnormal, shifts Belinda from Ghana to Britain and recruits her to discipline Amma. As Belinda navigates life in Britain as a housemaid, she enters into a complex dialogue between gender norms, labour and cultural memory. While Amma and her homosexuality is a "problem" (Donkor 94) for Belinda, she overlooks the problems that inform her own identity and selfhood. Ironically, Belinda's encounters with Amma expose her own true self and the liminal space she has always occupied. Belinda's liminality stems from her idea of home, which is caught somewhere between her past and present. Belinda's past is informed by the severe discrimination she and her mother experienced in their native village, as the latter was a prostitute. As Belinda tries to belie her past, fearing further rejection and ostracization, she neglects herself, as her unresolved trauma continues to inform her present as well. In addition to this, Belinda feels culturally alienated in Britain as she experiences a sense of dislocation, thereby failing to embrace her native culture as well as the host culture. She perceives herself as too unimportant to demand the attention of white people and cultivates a "fear of the whites" (Donkor 68). She doubts whether her very presence would make them angry.

The term "cultural cringe" was first used by Melbourne critic A.A. Phillips in his highly controversial essay of the same name. He used it to describe feelings of internalized inferiority complex that people of a country *Hold* towards their own culture (Das 52). In *Hold*, Belinda's self-neglect stems from the systemic devaluation of African cultures during colonial rule and the lingering effects of these colonial histories. Moreover, her position as a housemaid complicates her identity as it reinforces the labour systems of colonial exchange that marked Africa's past. Belinda's journey in Britain is connected to the colonial history of her country both directly and indirectly. She is in a struggle to belong, "conflicted between an old, native world that is being abolished by the invasive forces of modernity and/or the new dominant culture" (Das 49). Therefore, she is unable to accept Britain or Ghana as her home. Here, it is evident that Belinda's identity is informed not directly by the colonial history of the country, but by the indirect aftermath of these forces.

Belinda's fear of her past stems from the kind of treatment she and her mother received from the villagers as the latter was a sex worker. Discourses centered on sex work in Africa underwent major shifts before, during, and after colonisation. As Belinda's mother navigates Ghana in the 1980s as a prostitute, her experiences and choices are shaped by the colonial past of the country. African societies' attitudes towards sex work underwent a paradigm shift after European colonisation. Traditional African societies were not inclined to morally subjugate prostitution as unacceptable. "Oral traditions and written sources by European explorers who visited Africa before the nineteenth century are replete with reference to complex socio-sexual behaviour that seemed to be highly entrenched in the life of several communities" (Aderinto 470). But with European colonization and the rigid structures of morality and social acceptability it enforced, society's attitudes towards sex work and women who were into it changed (Aantjes et. al. 274). Pre-colonial ideas of sexuality and sexual morality were replaced by rigid moral codes that dictated gender roles and female sexuality, which in turn stigmatised discourses around prostitution.

The implementation of gendered and sexual segregation measures based on anxieties around female sexuality and sexual relations between colonisers and colonised has, we argue, created enduring stigmatising discourses around female sex workers in the region. The positioning of the sex worker-and not her sexual partners- as a risk to health and social stability, steadily infused local sexual and gender mores and were thus able to persist over time and following the independence of African states. (Aantjes et al. 274).

"Colonial domination and colonial power relations affected prostitution on multiple levels" (Kozma 730). Primarily, colonisation resulted in increasing migration of the male-population from the country, which in turn forced women into prostitution as a means of livelihood. European colonisation dubbed "non-erotic practices" that were systemic to African societies as "socially deviant" and culturally illegitimate. Colonisation also imposed strict Victorian moral codes of conduct upon African societies, "which favoured men and devalued women's labour and relegated women to the domestic sphere, marginalizing them economically". (Kozma 736-737).

All of these reasons shaped Belinda's mother's choices, which in turn led to the stigma she encountered in postcolonial Africa. Therefore, it is the colonial history of Africa and its aftermath that lingers in Belinda's memory in an indirect way. It is also interesting to note how

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Belinda cultivates a fear for her mother's customers, just like how she fears the whites. The coloniser-colonised relationality is expanded here to complicate Belinda's identity. Belinda's past represents Africa's colonial past, making her identity negotiation not just a personal struggle but a collective quest rooted in the history of colonisation.

Nana, Amma's mother, is a character who expects her daughter to live a traditional Ghanaian way of life. Amma, who grows up in Britain, just like any other British citizen, finds it impossible to connect to Ghana and the Ghanaian values Nana is obsessed with. In fact, the pressure to conform to these values complicates Amma's life and forces her into a liminal space. Jeffrey Boakye, in his book Black Listed: Black British Culture Explored, throws light upon the hardships of existing in such a liminal space. He writes:

> Ideological distance, physical distance, the distances that create difference, and the paradoxes whereby you can be intimately linked to an identity that is out of reach. My proximity to Ghana is precisely that: a paradox. It's an inherent part of my black identity but culturally distant, leaving me, a black British Ghanaian, hovering in some kind of identity limbo (Boakye).

Nana gives undue significance to Belinda's quality of discipline and wants the latter to teach her own daughter good manners. Nana thinks her daughter needs "therapy" (Donkor 208) and "white help" (Donkor 209) to cure her of her "rages, madness and strong emotions" (Donkor 208). Frantz Fanon remarks in his seminal work Black Skin, White Masks, "The black man wants to be like the-white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence" (228).

Nana's feelings of 'superiority' for the whites make her think that blackness is something to be controlled by the whites. She believes that only the civilized whites could absolve her supposedly uncivilized daughter of her illness. Despite attaching paramount significance to Ghanaian culture and way of life, Nana unwittingly cultivates feelings of inferiority towards her own culture and attaches undue significance to that of the whites. She thinks her daughter's ways of behaving are savage and need reformation, replicating the white colonisers' belief that they have to civilize Africans whom they considered savage. Amma, in fact, remarks that they use medications "to control black women" (Donkor 209). Here, she specifically takes a dig at Nana's perception that blackness is something which is to be tamed by the whites. Likewise, Belinda uses words like "badness, sickness and strangeness" (Donkor 166) to describe the way she reacts against racist abuses hurled at her in Britain's public transport system. These

instances reveal the feeling of cultural inferiority that Africans *Hold* towards themselves as they navigate life in Britain.

Ironically, Nana herself had experienced a sense of not belonging in the black community in Britain. Nana recalls how she was ostracized by the black community in Britain for her impotency before the birth of Amma. As she acknowledges the systemic inequalities that underlie apparent connections based on race and nationality, she learns to accept Amma as she is. She says, "I can't have my girl forced to stand outside like I had to. Eh? My Amma cannot. This way she is" (Donkor 218). She accepts Amma's identity as she says, "Do Otuos only know the pronoun "I"? There are several others. You are all stuck on one. Constantly" (Donkor 218). Thus, as the novel ends, Nana connects to Amma just like how Belinda connects to her own mother.

In all of these instances, there is an underlying sense of identity that is enmeshed with colonial history. Here, Amma's "madness" (Donkor 208), in Nana's words, is symbolic of her homosexuality. Thus, self-expression is barred and is to be controlled by therapy. She tries to impose order on Amma's way of life, makes "her daughter lie about herself" (Donkor 174), and fails to accept Amma as she is. As Nana tries to fit herself and her daughter into the norms of order and conformity, she reinforces the colonial histories of control and discipline. As Amma rejects efforts at conforming, she breaks the image of the colonised, which is in turn an offshoot of the coloniser-colonised binary. She tries to carve her identity outside the colonial impositions on identity construction. In turn, she disrupts the relationality and steps out of it, thereby claiming herself. For Belinda, the relationship between her mother and her customer is normal, while the one between Amma and her girlfriend is not. She prefers relationships governed by power over lesbian relationships. This indicates her preference for authority over freedom. Though Belinda pretends to be unbothered by her past and what informs her identity, her character development is based on the histories of control that her country has experienced. Thus, her present is informed by her past, i.e., her country's past.

The Motif of Blackness

Amma is a bold Ghanaian girl whose sexual preferences make her unacceptable to her own family. Belinda's struggle to fit into traditional gender roles comes into conflict as she meets Amma. The realization that Amma, who was born and brought up in a traditional Ghanaian house*Hold* in Britain, defines her relationship with her native country in a way that is different

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from Belinda's, makes her confront her own divided self and troubled past. Amma's identity is informed by the realization and acceptance of her sexuality, which makes her experience blackness in a way that is different from that of other members of the African diaspora in Britain. The idea of blackness is directly and indirectly interrogated throughout the novel. Each character relates to the idea of blackness in a unique way. Belinda, who is otherwise detached from her roots, embraces blackness as a token of identity as she lives among whites in Britain.

However, as she encounters racism from a group of Jamaican girls in Britain's public transport system, Belinda realizes that African blackness is different from Jamaican blackness. As the Jamaican girl calls Belinda "fucking Africa Bambara" (Donkor 163), the latter encounters the same question Amma raised regarding collectively identifying as 'black' in Britain. She understands that there are undercurrents of marginalisation that further characterize the systemic structures of racism and oppression that permeate British society. Belinda connects this moment to the differential experience her mother received in the Adurubaa (a Ghanaian village) for being a prostitute. Here, she rethinks the idea of being black. When blackness was not accommodative enough for Belinda's mother, who lived in post-colonial Africa, it is not all-encompassing for Amma (on account of her sexuality), and Belinda (on account of her African roots) either. As Belinda stands up against the attitude of the Jamaicans, she thinks that something has "slipped" (Donkor 166) out of her. She thinks that this way of responding is a "strangeness in the blood, handed down from mother to daughter" (Donkor 166). Thus, this incident makes Belinda embrace her roots for the first time. She gives in to understanding what she is and what informs her.

This moment is significant as Belinda recalls how she and her mother were not allowed entry into the church and how they, in turn, conducted their own "Bible study at home every Sunday" (Donkor 167). Christianity was introduced in Africa by colonial intervention. Therefore, Belinda and her mother's attempt at making their own study of the Bible can be considered a symbol of their resistance against colonial impositions on order and conformity. Years later, as Belinda unwittingly topples the system of order she has enforced upon herself, she recalls this moment of resistance. This can also be connected to the order of heteronormativity that pins confines Amma. Here, Belinda gets reminded of her ability to resist and challenge expectations. Thus, the narrative captures the relationality between colonial histories and diasporic identity not just as it is located on the binary opposition of the coloniser-colonised equation, but also on account of how varied expressions of hierarchical power systems dictate the lives of the

characters. In that sense, the relation between colonial histories and the construction of the characters' identity is not a linear one, but a complex dialectic, where the histories, its aftermath, and the narratives based on it intersect across geographical borders.

Throughout the novel, Belinda's mother exists only in Belinda's memory. She is the only factor that connects Belinda to her village in Ghana. Belinda's mother can also be considered as a representation of her country. Belinda's memory is heavily informed by the way her mother's customers treated her. As she recalls how her rights were often violated, the coloniser-colonised relationality is hinted. Amma wonders how beautiful Belinda's mother must have been and how beautiful things "always got ruined or robbed" (Donkor 173). She thinks, "was it only black people's beautiful things that ended trampled on like that?". Here, Belinda's mother is connected to black consciousness and the collective memory of colonial experience in Africa. As Belinda embraces her past through the memories of her mother, she embraces her roots and thereby herself.

Rootedness As Anti-colonial Praxis

Mary is a character who resides in Ghana throughout the novel. She cultivates a profound disregard for European conventions that stereotype Africans. She is a rebel who is unwilling to submit to social systems and accept her identity as inferior to that of others. Mary lives in the present and is not haunted by her past. She accepts her homeland and does not harbour feelings of superiority towards the coloniser. Mary serves as a foil to Belinda, representing an alternative way of negotiating identity that is rooted in acceptance rather than alienation.

Belinda initially believes that self-erasure is preferable to being unable to fulfil gender roles and occupational demands. She tells Amma, "You don't always get to be the thing you want or think you deserve, or whatever. You don't, and you have to leave with it and move on" (Donkor 210). Belinda here voices her dissatisfaction with having to conform to expectations related to gender, class and nationality. The course of Belinda's life changes with Mary's death. She realizes that her efforts at conforming to gender roles were due to her fear of deviance. She equates her attempts at conforming to the 'good girl' image to self-silencing. As she looks at how her own mother, Amma, Nana and Mary had performed deviance, purposefully or not, she realizes the need to break free and establish herself. As Belinda prepares to address the crowd at Mary's funeral, she empathizes with her own mother and Amma as she notices that "the audience's stare was so very loud and so ready to judge" (Donkor 293). She imagines how hard

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it must have been for Amma and her mother to meet the "demands" (Donkor 293) of the crowd. She also recalls how she "herself had anticipated and acted on" (Donkor 293) them all her life. She realizes that her true self is far removed from what all the stares demand. She feels that "the challenging, bullying look" from "the fair-skinned man…. only wanted simplicity, something it could easily call 'good' or 'bad' (Donkor 293). Belinda problematizes the white man's gaze and the colonial relations that encouraged conformity and punished deviance. Eventually, Belinda sees her mother as a version of her own self. She acknowledges that beneath all the pretensions at conforming, she was "as alone and as friendless as Mother had been" (Donkor 191). As Belinda returns to her country, her view towards life itself changes. She tells Amma:

> Will you take your own advice? Be nice to yourself also and really think about what is…what is going to be nice for you…in the long run. If you get what I mean. Because maybe a candlelight dinner with some boy is even going to mix you up even more. It might make you less on your own for one evening perhaps. But maybe it isn't something you truly want. Maybe is something you don't even need to do. Because maybe your own way is the best way. For you. (Donkor 234)

This return is symbolic of Belinda's return to her own self, which she considered as an object of neglect all the while she stayed in Britain. As she reaches her village, Belinda looks at how her land is divided into "endless rooms and rooms and rooms" (Donkor 304) using "thin white chord tied between poles" (Donkor 304). Here, her consciousness resonates with that of her nation. She finally accepts that her past and her fear of the same reflects Africa's colonial past and its aftermath. Thus, Mary's death releases Belinda from the burden of cultural alienation. It acts as a catalyst for Belinda's eventual reckoning with her identity and her claim to agency. In this sense, Mary's death is not an end, but a beginning. Her death makes Belinda revisit Ghana, a journey that allows her to reconnect with her homeland and confront the aftermath of colonisation. This act of return is pivotal as it marks Belinda's transition from a life of fulfilling others' expectations to one informed by her own choices. This journey is also symbolic of Belinda's acceptance of Amma's homosexuality.

Amma eventually gives in to the inability to identify herself with the black community in Britain and therefore submits to the heteronormative system. Despite attempts at overcoming surveillance systems and disciplining forces, Amma eventually fails to embrace her true identity. She is driven to self-abnegation by the competing claims of respectability attached to the body of a black female migrant. As the novel ends, Amma conforms to the traditional heteronormative framework and relegates her true identity to the background. It is notable here

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that while Belinda's shift is initiated by her relocation to Ghana, Amma's abandonment of herself is motivated by the need to validate her existence in Britain. Belinda's movement to Ghana finds her a space for self-realisation unmediated by British racial hierarchies. On the other hand, Amma, who continues in Britain, decides to give in to the constant pressure of proving her authenticity and respectability, which is problematically linked with expectations related to her community and nation.

Conclusion

Stuart Hall writes in his essay Cultural Identity and Diaspora:

> Cultural identity…is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (225).

Drawing on Hall's insight that cultural identities are processual in nature, *Hold* can be interrogated as a negotiation of such "becoming" among its protagonists. Belinda, Amma, and Mary represent distinct modalities of negotiating Black diasporic identity in Britain, yet their struggles intersect at the crossroads of identity, colonial history and tradition. Although they are all black, they negotiate black identity in different ways. Belinda's journey from servitude to self reclamation through her return to her homeland reveals how collective memory can initiate a reclamation of agency. As Nana tries to fit herself and her daughter into the norms of order and conformity, she reinforces the colonial histories of control and discipline. As Amma rejects efforts at conforming, she breaks the image of the colonised, which is in turn an offshoot of the coloniser-colonised binary. She tries to carve her identity outside the colonial impositions on identity construction. In turn, she disrupts the relationality and steps out of it, thereby claiming herself. However, this does not last long and it culminates in self abnegation under heteronormative pressure. This reveals the multiple layers of oppression that black lesbian women are subjected to in the English soil. Mary's rootedness in Ghana can be considered as an anti-colonial praxis, whereby she resists attempts at conforming to the mainstream narratives on colonization. Therefore, the legacy of colonialism continues to resonate in the diasporic identities of Black people living in Britain. The characters' individual struggles intersect with their shared experience of negotiating a world shaped by colonial

legacies and patriarchal systems. The female experience is thereby linked to the colonial history of the country. Therefore, it is not just a question of identifying with the colonised, but also the complex network of the forgetting and foregrounding of histories that determines the characters' identities.

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