

Construction of Gendered Identities through Cultural Memory in Moses Isegawa's Novel, Snakepit

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Abstract- *Creative writing from Uganda hardly passes without the mention of the Idi Amin era which has significantly influenced the writing from that country. In this paper I examine how Isegawa narrates a people's cultural memory to define gender identities in his novel, Snakepit. Cultural memory permeates individual as well as social identity formation. Narrating cultural memory results from long interactions with others as well as semiotic objects in a particular social setting. Snakepit was purposively sampled to underscore the interpenetrating relationship between cultural memory and gendered identity formations. The discussion applies itself to the post-colonial theory to explore and make meaning out of the narrative.*

Key words- *Narration; Gendered Identities; Cultural Memory; Snakepit; Isegawa*

1. INTRODUCTION

Snakepit (2004) is set in the years of Idi Amin's reign and its narrative focuses on the upper class that surrounds the despot. This is a shift from Abyssinian Chronicles (2000) which begins in the sixties through to the eighties and explores the fate of a young narrator from the rural setting and members of his extended family. Abyssinian traverses places and its characters experience Amin from a greater physical distance than do characters in Snakepit. The novel is a fictional illustration of Isegawa's changing portrayal of female characters in his creative works and, to a large extent, African literature. Whereas he pays a lot of attention to female characters in Abyssinian Chronicles (2000) in which he portrays them as champions of protest against male domination and political excesses of the Idi Amin administration, the author appears to portray them as hapless victims of their male counterparts in Snakepit. In this paper, I examine how Isegawa (2003) defines the female character in a post-independent African nation state that is marred with oppression and murder of innocent citizens. In order to determine these gender identities, I apply the feminist literary theory, the postcolonial theory and narratology to interrogate the interweaving and interpenetrating narratives that (re)define gender in the novel.

2. NARRATING THE POSTCOLONIAL BY THE OMNISCIENT NARRATOR

The author does not lose sight of the subtle feminine issues that many African male authors appear to overlook. He illuminates such issues through multiple closely-knit narratives. This is a noticeable shift from earlier African male writers such as Achebe (1958), Ekwensi (1963) and Ngugi (1962) who initially portrayed the female character as an appendage of the male character, thereby, attracting

criticisms to the effect that female characters in such works are incomplete and inaccurate. This has been largely due to modern African literature having been first written by men, who had been culturally privileged in the acquisition of formal education which is the basic requirement in authorship. The educated African men had dual advantage over their female counterparts: they came from a patriarchal society and were also educated by colonisers whose background celebrated and upheld patriarchy. Bauman (2010) posits that female characters have been used for different purposes in the post-colonial African literary productions. Taking a critical glimpse at renowned creative works such as Things Fall Apart (1958), God's Bits of Wood (1960), The Joys of Motherhood (1979), and Nervous Conditions (1988), female characters change from being contented and invisible to being demanding, visible and assertive to create particular identity for themselves. Things Fall Apart, for instance, has been criticised for treating female subjectivities to inadequate representation. Most female characters in the novel such as Okonkwo's wives are flat and submissive characters who are satisfied with their cultural oppressive structures such as polygamy. Whereas critics are quick to accuse Achebe of being too male-promoting, there is a plausible number of reasons for this rather limited female representation. One and, perhaps, the most important, is that readers are shown female representation largely from Okonkwo's point-of-view, who is himself a phallic symbol. Two, the urgent need of decolonisation which contests the African culture against the Western one appears to have over-shadowed the "withinist" discourse of the need to propel the African female to equal status with her male counterpart.

The changing treatment of the woman selfhood in these novels and the advent of female African creative writers indicate an African society that is not only moving toward—but also celebrating—gender egalitarianism. There are various reasons that have necessitated the

egalitarian idea of gender equality in African literature. One, there is the changing European culture that has witnessed gradual change in issues of gender roles. Two, the educated Africans to whom gender equality is one of the tenets of an ideal imposed upon them as colonised Africans. In fact, “African Dilemma” prompts African women to choose between being true to their traditional culture, and embracing the colonising Western culture and having equal rights (O’Brien, 2001:95-96). Critical approbation in African literature has focused on this dilemma.

In *Snakepit* (2004), Isegawa pushes further the bruising landscapes of postcolonial Uganda, his homeland, during the time of Dictator Idi Amin, when competing and interlocking vents of emotional cruelty keep despots gratified and servants submissive. The narrative unveils a nation-state where no one—either men or women, husbands or wives, enemies or lovers, sons or daughters—is safe from the consuming and insatiable desires and actions of the men in power. General Bazooka, the system’s agent of terror who regrets why he has hired Cambridge-educated Bat Katanga as his “Bureaucrat Two,” is a man of many lives who also stays with a seductive concubine-cum-operative Victoria. Victoria is a spy created by men in power and the General uses her to lure men and women to their deaths. Ambitious and acquisitive, Katanga finds himself steadily entrapped by events which spiral ominously out of control as deceit, extortion, treachery and murder are the stock in trade in this unpredictable order of things.

In *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000), Isegawa uses the first person narrator who mostly witnesses the events and shares his experiences with the reader. In *Snakepit*, however, there is a shift to the third person singular point-of-view. The third person narrator or the omniscient narrator is the “all-knowing” narrator. An omniscient narrator—one who takes an omniscient point-of-view—can see and report everything. The telling of the story can reveal everything done by any character by telling out the thoughts of that character, and events from the perspective of any character.

The reader might see inside the mind and motivations of the hero and heroine, the villain, the secondary characters, and even inactive spectators. By contrast, a first-person narrative in which the narrator tells the story from his or her own limited point-of-view, using “I” cannot reveal any other characters’ thoughts. The narrator only experiences his or her own thoughts and cannot describe any events that happen when he is not there, unless there is a completely different approach of coming to know about them such by being narrated to by a different character or by reading from another source such as a diary, book or a newspaper or, by witnessing overt evidence in specific telling-contexts. On the other hand, a limited omniscient perspective seeks to reveal the hidden thoughts of two or more characters but not necessarily all of them. The remaining characters—whose inner thoughts are not represented by the limited omniscient—would be

uncovered by an external observation, a similar experiment used to know most people in our real world, but the author does not tell or even hint to the reader what is in the minds of such characters. An omniscient point-of-view, which Isegawa deploys in *Snakepit*, is an all seeing narrative point-of-view. Instead of the narrative telling perspective being limited to a certain character’s view point, the novelist describes the inner sensory experiences of most of his characters:

She (Victoria) woke in the morning with fear in the bit of her stomach, and dressed to go to work with doubt plaguing her mind. She arrived at her office nervous, as if she expected a bullet in the back, and she started sorting papers, useless files (Isegawa, 2004:136; added emphasis)

And below, the omniscient narrator further penetrates another character’s thoughts:

He thought a lot about justice; it did not make sense. He was living outside the bounds of book justice; most Ugandans, most people groaning under dictatorships of all sorts, did. In many places it was the criminals handling the apparatus of justice, meting out their version of book justice. I am also compromised. By accepting the Saudi prince’s money I participated in corruption, albeit involuntarily. Now I am being punished by criminal killers with dripping hands (Isegawa 2004, p.141).

The omniscient narrator uses third person pronouns—he, she, they—in the writing, in which arrangement, the writer can choose to dip into the thoughts of any of the characters and reveal things that have occurred in the past or will happen in the future. Jahn (2005) posits that story-telling can occur on different levels. As Barth (1984 [1981]) puts it, there are narratives within narratives within narratives—narratives embedded upon other narratives. One such circumstance arises when a character in a story begins to tell a story of his own, effectively creating a tale within another. Like *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000), *Snakepit* (2004) weaves its main narrative by building on multiple stories of several characters. Omniscient narrators have complete freedom to move through space; they can move from one character’s conscience to another or from one place and moment to another—and back again. This strategy is suitable in exploring many credible thematic issues such as the role and status of female characters in *Snakepit*. This strategy helps to explore setting and personal psychological conflicts that resonate with gendered identity construction.

The challenge for writers who engage this point-of-view is that each character must have a distinctive voice so that the reader is never at a loss as to whose thoughts he is in at a particular moment. This device is challenging for an epic

novel, which navigates a theme with several tangled subplots. If the author tells what the reader wants to know, then tension is lost. But if the novelist controls this technique to give the reader only the required information, there is unprecedented heightening of tension. The one advantage of the omniscient narrator is that there is a lot more knowledge for the reader trickling from different private thoughts of the characters. They, too, become all-knowing. There are two big disadvantages, however: first, the reader has a broad view, not an intimate one as he cannot identify particularly with any specific character. There is the danger of losing the reader's interest; he may not care about what happens because he is not feeling empathy with any specific character. Second, it can be very disconcerting, particularly if the writer starts off in one person's thoughts, and suddenly announces what another character is thinking. Doing so can rob the readers of their reading trail. Consequently, Snakepit, engages many characters who have a definite potential to account for all that happens in this regime. Even then, their narratives appear crowded, giving none an opportunity to develop fully. Ideally, Bat's and Bazooka's narratives need to be developed more exhaustively alongside those of Victoria, her mother and Babit. Too many stories and characters appear to compete for attention which they get but only briefly.

This chapter examines the character formation of both females and males in the turbulent years of Amin's rule. The analysis is informed by narratology, feminist literary and postcolonial criticisms in its interrogation of gendered identity reconstruction in Snakepit.

3. THE POLITICS GENDERED IDENTITY (RE) CONSTRUCTION

Bat Katanga's story begins with mixed feelings of excitement and hope—when he attends an interview in a military helicopter—and the eerie mood the helicopter described as having “spinning blades like whirling knives” (5) evokes to forebode the multiple gendered violence that the reader witnesses in the course of the narrative. The knives represent the tools of this bizarre violence and autocratic regime that is about to be described in detail. The ironic description of the helicopter as having looked like “some creature made for children to play with” underscores the theme of appearance as opposed to reality. The helicopter epitomises not only General Bazooka's social identity but also his moral decay as he acquires the helicopter through corrupt means—at the expense of the citizenry whose interests he is supposed to guard. General Bazooka's status sharply contrasts with those of other characters in the novel as the latter live in squalid conditions. By inviting Bat for an interview in a flying military helicopter, the general exhibits the height of extravagancy and abuse of office, which the regime he zealously serves is identified with. One wonders why Bat has to be interviewed in a flying helicopter when the interview has nothing to do with flying helicopters.

General Bazooka has a reason for doing this. He says flying elevates a man to the status of a deity, a god. He believes that viewing the world from above allows one to appreciate the trappings of power (8). The General's utterance borders on, and presents an ominous situation given the weak economy that the general and other Ugandans have to contend with. The General is interested in inflating his identity to that of a deity known for being all-knowing, omnipresent and omnipotent. This, perhaps, explains the presence of multiple spy agents that the system uses to stalk their victims, guilty or not guilty. Through these agents, the system registers its presence in every part of the country.

When he completes his postgraduate degree at Cambridge in Britain, Bat watches with satisfaction from afar as the “flag independence” gives way to some robust economic prowess in Uganda, hence increasing his chances of securing a plum position in government when he returns home. He has a dream to make an economic fortune, particularly with each “reform” imposed by Idi Amin. When Bat finally gets a job as Bureaucrat Two in the Ministry of Power and Communications, he sees himself as part of the top brass of the government with his idealistic sense of integrity and honesty firmly intact. To him, everything seems to have been working in anticipation of this defining moment which includes his victorious entry into the top echelons of power. However, he unwittingly accepts a bribe from a Saudi prince which rolls out a fateful journey—both psychological and physical—into the most bizarre and chilling precincts of the dehumanisation and barbarism that is the hallmark of the Amin government.

Through an adept construction of both female and male subjectivities, Snakepit explores a sombre, yet, a lively story with unforgettable characters—male and female. The novel captures Marshal Idi Amin's abusive and oppressive leadership with the imagery and symbolism of the suffering male and female characters. Idi Amin's reign causes fear, torture, detentions, murder and even plunder of his country's economy with glee. Dictatorship has fatally affected the Uganda nation-state under the oppressive leadership of Marshal Amin Dada. Dictatorship is a metaphor for Uganda's history that has locked up the country into certain cultural and economic patterns that deny citizens alternative possibilities. The narrative explores the suffocating citizenry that largely submits to fate as illustrated by the feeling of entrapment that dictatorship can performatively create. The parliament building, for example, has a massive statue of Marshal Amin Dada, a statue that the narrator says resembles many of its replications erected in towns and the countryside all over the country (17). Amin, like all his top military officers serving under him, is keen on assuming the stature of a deity with all its definitive identity—all-knowing and present in all situations.

By erecting his statues all over the country Amin epitomises a regime that has all its senses everywhere in the country. It implies that he is all-present and this

strategy must instil fear among his country men and women at all times. It also suggests a regime with weird national priorities as huge budgets are directed towards putting in place institutions and structures that immortalise the leaders and little on improving the lives of those they lead. The citizens become state enemies as they are terrorised, humiliated and hunted down and killed. The dream of a better life for many Ugandans, especially those with good education, is frustrated and nipped in the bud. Their hope that the flag independence was giving way to economic independence when Amin expels all the foreigners turns into a dashed dream. Every part of the country appears to be unsafe for the citizens; it is not even safe for educated civil servants such as Bat. He reminisces his experience in General Bazooka's office at the Ministry when he notices that the inside of General Bazooka's office has a background that has a conspicuously large portrait of Amin in a saluting mode with his thick fingers sticking out and adorning radiating medals on his chest(6). The portrait represents Amin's godly abilities to be everywhere at a particular time. This omnipresent attribute is part of the dictator's identity formation and is meant to instil fear and force submission. The instability of the country is portrayed when the Avenger is described by the omniscient narrator as having taken off precariously in a manner to suggest imbalance: it veers to one side, then hops to the other accompanied with deafening noise. This forebodes Amin's unstable and failing regime that is bent on doing anything to remain in motion, in power. Here, like in *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000), the personal stories represent the public. General Bazooka's decision to interview Bat in a flying helicopter is also calculated to intimidate him and enlist him into the cabal of sycophancy, which the system is used to inculcating. The General invites Bat to a tour but cautions that if at the end of it all Bat is not impressed, then, the General will have the option of interviewing somebody else. The General, however, brags that he has never been wrong in his choices of people he thinks he can work. (7). The General arrogates the all-knowing identity—a preserve of the gods—to himself to the effect that he is perfect and infallible. This type of mindset is responsible for the dictatorship that is evident in the text. The General feels that he has the monopoly of thought and does not allow any dialogue with his juniors who have better ideas and skills than him in the running of government affairs. He imitates the British super-rich men and women who hold business sittings in jets, aboard expensive water vessels or from inside coffins made of gold (7). The attempt to ape the former colonial master alienates this African leadership from its core responsibilities of identifying with its own situation to serve its people fairly. This concurs with Said's (1978) interrogation of neo-colonialism as a political regime and behavioural pattern of unflagging dominance of nominally independent countries through transnational pretences mediated through business outfit like the ones General Bazooka cites. General Bazooka further reveals to Bat that he owns a fifth

of everything in Uganda. An important issue that arises here is whether the sense of national unity benefits the masses who labour to create wealth through the taxes they pay, or this sense is utilised by the ruling class who constitute a small minority and their vested egoistical interests.

The narrative hints at neo-colonialism, a domination of people and societies by capital through the liberal market and other ideological means, rather than through direct political rule. It is the exploitation and oppression of the majority of the labouring masses under the guise of liberal markets and free flow of commodities. The result of this approach is misery, violation of human rights, murder, abductions, rape, to mention but a few. Bat, one of the lead characters in *Snakepit* becomes a victim of neo-colonialism when his master, General Bazooka, vents his anger on him in a business deal that has gone awry. He is portrayed as a land grabber, who is power hungry and corruptly rich. He is also callous and ruthlessly mean; he does not believe in humanity. He gives orders to “shoot and ask questions later” (8).

In one of the narratives that General Bazooka unveils to Bat while in the air, the general reveals his distaste for intellectuals and procedure. He says that he does not understand what intellectuals think and that it bothers him the least. The General also orders Bat to take charge of the ministry and fire anybody whether educated or non-educated, at will. The General also orders Bat to ensure that the former's needs and desires are a priority at the ministry. Bat is directed to ensure that every time the electricity fails in the General's home, he would hold Bat responsible. He further asks Bat to keep the phones in a working condition and ensure timely mail delivery (9).

There is little doubt that General Bazooka's identity is constructed on the basis of his military experience and position as a general who serves as the Minister for Power and Communication and doubles as the “boss” of the Anti-Smuggling Unit in a system that thrives on intimidation, murder and pillage. He is not sure about his safety even if he is “boss”. He is paranoid and suspicious at all times. As a result, he issues threats and deadly orders even in what appears to be the most innocent of circumstances. In fact, Bat's interview depicts Bazooka as a hands-on general who wants to do everything by himself to be sure that it is done the way he wants. He does not trust anybody and his approval of Bat is merely pretentious. General Bazooka's influence on Bat during the interview influences Bat's later identity as an employee in General Bazooka's ministry. He takes up the job and later finds himself slipping into the “snakepit.”

General Bazooka's identity is also constructed on his upbringing. His grandfather had been a traditional-warrior turned colonial-soldier fighting wars for the imperial British East African Company. He had fought numerous wars for the King's African Rifles too. The General is excited about his grandfather's career which influences him. General Bazooka's shortcoming is that he has obtained little formal education and this has had heavy

implication and influence on his career in his later life. Although General Bazooka and Bat are age-mates, the two have undergone entirely different life and career paths with Bat going through life robustly confident like a “powerful machine” while the General has been a hustler. In retrospect, the General is relieved and satisfied that, indeed, the last could come first, and vice versa (11). The identity of the General and Bat has been influenced by their childhood backgrounds. The omniscient narrator links their present to their past. First, General Bazooka has always been conscious about the challenges of third-generation breed in which he belongs. Right from his formative years he has been determined not just to aim to survive, but also to prosper. He has always wanted to take shortcuts in his way to the top echelons of his society (12). He believes in hurriedly cut deals with the aim to empower himself economically and in the government’s pecking order. He sends Bat to Saudi Arabia to clinch such a mega deal: to negotiate with the Saudi government for a “supply of construction equipment” and General Bazooka would “get a cut of the commission, delivered in cash” (70). Due to General Bazooka’s influence, Bat begins to think in terms of material accumulation for himself as opposed to his earlier idealistic thinking of service delivery to the citizens. Thus, when he is tasked to lead a delegation to Saudi Arabia, the narrator says that it is here that Bat begins to feel that he has been wasting his time all along, that he should have already made his fortune (70) and settled in life. General Bazooka’s career in the military is not a coincidence of some sort:

With Bazooka’s education and fantastic drive, the army could not ignore him. He showed a genius for all things military. He was above all, fearless and serious. He revelled in the discipline, the hierarchy and the obsession in detail. He adhered to the hard rules of reward and punishment with military zeal. He got promoted quickly (Isegawa 2004, p.13).

General Bazooka’s dedication to his military career ensures his steady promotions to the rank of general and speedy accumulation of ill-gotten wealth. He hates anybody who doesn’t recognise him for his ability. He mostly hates civilians who do not think much of soldiers in general.

His identity is also constructed on balkanisation. As a child, he grows up quite conscious that the southerners enjoy more privileges as manifested by their domination in the civil service and the army. As a result, they own everything that he dreams of. This perception influences him to fight viciously his way to riches. He starts doing odd jobs after school and even steals from the shops he works in. Consequently, he begins to hate school because the children of the well-to-do families come to school in chauffeur-driven top range cars of his dreams. Also, he begins his young adult life in the military by robbing people of their property at gun-point. In one such incident, he confronts five men and orders one of them to surrender

his much-sought-after expensive gold-plated Oris Autocrat wristwatch. The man refuses to surrender it even when Bazooka threatens him with a drawn grenade. The man still refuses to surrender the watch when his companions beseech him to do so for the sake of their lives:

*In the ensuing scuffle the grenade went off. Bazooka barely managed to dive out of harm’s way. The explosion rocked the place, blowing limbs and clothes off people. Prize in hand, momentarily deaf in one ear, he made a speedy return to base. News of the incident was reported in the morning paper: **THREE KILLED IN GRENADE ACCIDENT** (Isegawa 2004, p.15).*

This morally rotten society thrives on propaganda and misinformation. The media are partial and report lies, possibly, because they are government-owned or they fear reprisals. In a system such as the one General Bazooka serves, the media are supposed to play an integral role of informing, educating and, ultimately, liberating society; they must be objective and report the truth. In this case, the soldier-robber has confronted civilians and deliberately killed them and robbed them of their valuables at gun-point, and yet, the media report that it is an accident. The question of “accident” would possibly not arise because the soldier, Bazooka, has on various occasions during the confrontation warned that his victims have a choice to surrender “the Autocratic” or risk losing their lives when he blows them up. He is determined to rob, kill or do both to his victims. After the incident, fellow soldiers celebrate Bazooka’s deed by nicknaming him “General Oris”. There is no action, legal or otherwise, taken against the soldier despite the overwhelming evidence.

The country is steadily becoming a failing state as it does not guarantee its citizens’ freedoms and security. The wrongdoer is promoted instead of the system giving his victims or their kin the opportunity to pursue justice. Indeed, it is ironic that the soldier, Bazooka, is promoted for his zeal of work:

He led operations against heavily armed car-thieving rings and wiped them out with a minimum loss of men. He tackled Kondos, the armed robbers who terrorized households, by living them into traps and ambushes and destroying them in do-or die shoot outs (Isegawa 2004, p.15).

This incident is satirical of post-independent African leadership. How can a soldier, who is a robber, wipe out robbery? How can this soldier pretend to be morally upright when there is virtually no evidence in the narrative that the system in which he serves believes in the same ideals of zero tolerance to crime? In fact, if the system cracks down on coffee smugglers, it does so for individual benefit of the ruling class. The impounded coffee finally benefits those who impound it. This is the reason General Bazooka is agitated when this portfolio is handed to Ashes

in a cabinet reshuffle. It is, therefore, not surprising that Bazooka alone owns a fifth of Uganda in terms of assets and land. He is put in charge of the Armed Robbery Cracking Unit when his own conscience about robbery and general crime is questionable. He has woven a personal identity that thrives on and celebrates crime. It is apparent the government he serves does not believe in the accountability of its officers who are charged with public responsibilities. General Bazooka works hard to build a murderous identity for himself; he becomes General Idi Amin's enforcer of the most heinous acts against humanity. Moreover, Idi Amin promotes him for the wrong reasons:

He was made a full colonel and he met General Idi Amin. It was love at first sight. In Amin he saw a leader under who he could rise to the very top. Amin, for one, recognized his potential, his future usability....He was sent to secure the South-Western Region... He locked up uncooperative army commanders, blocked roads with battle tanks and killed troublesome people. The mayor of Masaka ...was made to smoke his own penis before his body was dragged through the streets of the town (Isegawa 2004, p.15).

Idi Amin's savagery and barbaric acts of torture and murder are best captured through his trusted enforcers such as General Bazooka. The desire to entrench himself in power and remain there for a life-time makes Idi Amin insecure and, therefore, vicious. The targets of his atrocities are mainly innocent citizens who require his protection. The dragging of the mayor's body through streets, after he is forced to smoke his own manhood, has a sub-text to it: to deter, and intimidate real or imagined opponents and critics of the system.

These acts raise substantial questions with regard to postcolonial African leadership: what really is the importance of independence if African leadership is even more bizarre than the colonial one it replaced? Was Africa really ready for independence? Was this independence limited to flag independence, and not economic and social independence? Imbuga (1978) aptly captures the cynicism and disillusionment of the African masses after independence when one of his characters, Mosese, who is a university lecturer, comments that it was better while the people waited for political independence, for there was hope. Mosese regrets that the present post-colonial leadership has dashed the fulfillment of that hope and the people have nothing to look forward to.

Chatora (2009) argues that there is a close link between colonialism and how independent African leadership has sought to manipulate the colonial ideology as a scapegoat for perpetuating their hegemony indefinitely. He further posits that in most instances the attainment of independence has witnessed African leaders perpetuating the same anti-press freedom and undemocratic pieces of

legislations they inherited from their colonial predecessors. Thus, the birth of neo-colonialism unfolds.

Frantz Fanon's post-colonial ideas offer useful insights into this contentious terrain. Leading his professional life as a psychiatric specialist in the formative years of Algeria's struggles against colonial subjugation, Fanon (1961) was somewhat advantaged to interrogate the impact of colonialism on both the mind-sets and body of the colonised. According to Fanon, colonialism was so rigorously internalised in the colonial mind-set that post-colonial rule simply replays the power relations of the coloniser and his domination over the colonised. In this case, the colonised subject identifies with the oppressive trajectory of his former oppressors, often expressing control through violence and force. General Bazooka, who is conveniently the face of the ills of the Idi Amin regime, locks fellow unco-operative commanders up, blocks roads and kills those perceived to be anti-establishment. In Fanon's view, escaping this predicament requires a new post-colonial identity that would find articulation through the nurturing of more acceptable representations in cultural discourses such as literature and the media.

Violence is one of the most outstanding themes in the novel. The violence is presented at two levels. At the first level, we have violence, and murder committed against the innocent victims who also represent the low class. At the second level, there is violence, murder and witch-hunt among the ruling class when the generals begin looking for each other's necks due to suspicion and mistrust. At this second level, it is apparent that a dictatorship is like a saw that moves forth and back, preying on the masses then back on its own agents of murder and pillage. At both levels it is apparent that the leadership of this government is brutal because of how it hunts down and molests, jails or even kills individuals or groups.

Women in Snakepit come into play particularly when they are portrayed as death traps. On the one hand, General Bazooka promises Bat that they will work together; on the other hand, he privately schemes to sabotage and destroy him. Bat's work at General Bazooka's Ministry of Power and Communication is above board yet the General wants to eliminate him. The General does not transform what he says into action. He is, after all, not interested in service delivery. He is interested in eliminating individuals who might compete with him for the attention of Idi Amin, their boss, due to their good performance at their place of work:

He considered bugging his house with the help of Russian friends. But to what effect? Did he expect Bat to go around the house shouting anti-Amin slogans? The most effective way might be to put him at the mercy of Victoria Kayiwa. The two Southerners destroying each other would be entertaining to watch. Victoria would do (Isegawa 2004, p.16).

This, indeed, is a snakepit in which there is no toe or finger-hold when one begins slipping in it. In a snakepit, only the law of survival of the fittest applies. With these

inevitable traps set for Bat, it is ironic that he is excited about a government villa, complete with a gardener, a cook and watchman that he is given.

Bat's gender identity has been formed by his childhood experiences at school. He had always yearned to study Mathematics and Economics, a dream which he fulfills at Makerere University in the later years. However, something happens to him when he is in secondary school—which later compels him to take charge of his life. He writes a letter with threatening undertones to one of his schoolmates to the effect that he would kill him. The threatened boy had borrowed an old family radio from Bat, promising to return it soon. However, the boy reneges on his promise, prompting Bat to write the letter. A few days later, a police detective visits his father and arrests him together with Bat. They both run the risk of facing seven years in prison. The incident changes Bat's life after his father pays a heavy bribe to free himself and his son. Since then Bat keeps few friends to avoid trouble from any quarter.

Despite what happens to Bat's father, history seems to repeat itself when Bat serves in Idi Amin's government and has to work and interact with individuals whose aim is to create problems for him. His experience at school forebodes similar life-threatening experiences in his later life both as a citizen and an employee of a failing government. Bat finds himself "sliding down the slimy walls of the snakepit without a hand or foothold" (71) when he disappears without trace for some time. He receives a phone call summoning him to the Nile Perch Hotel where he is captured, blindfolded and driven away to various detention units. The narrator ponders over that moment and reveals that the time between his last moments of freedom and the present state in which he is restricted had barely lasted over a minute (85) but with grave implications. The soldiers, who arrest him tear the clothes off his body in such a dehumanising manner, "like hyenas ripping a kill's coat" (85) leaving him only with his underwear.

The desire for power and the ambition to make a difference is also responsible for Bat's gender identity redefinition. While growing up, he realises that most of the people opt to study languages and history due to their perceived less rigorous effort needed to pass them, and yet the job market appeared to favour those studying science disciplines such as engineering. Bat notices also that most of Amin's most strategic workers are uneducated stooges, former "butchers, garbage men and loafers." Thus, Bat struggles and succeeds in his studies to make a difference. These semi-literate bureaucrats later seek Bat's assistance to open accounts in foreign countries. They have amassed wealth and want to siphon it out to secret accounts outside the country.

Snakepit appears to posit that most African countries have failed because of poor leadership that breeds corruption, which ultimately impoverishes the general population, and benefits only a few people. Given this state of affairs, it is unbelievable that the government is still in operation (18)

thus far. The narrative attributes this "miracle" to intellectuals who work behind the scenes because Amin's sycophants cannot allow them to take a leading role in the running of the country's affairs. As such, "Bat sometimes felt like a herdsman in charge of perverse pigs" (18). He tries to change the system to replace the stooges but his boss, General Bazooka, keeps delaying the purge on mediocrity, arguing that there were no funds to implement such changes. Yet, the government receives a steady supply of military hardware in form of fighter bombers and battle. Again, the author appears to satirise the wrong priorities of African governments.

Bat is quite conscious of forming his identity based on his job position. When he meets a beautiful girl at one of the many weddings to which he has been sent to represent General Bazooka, he talks in a manner that reveals his social class. When the girl, Victoria Kayewa, asks him where he stays, he gives an elaborate response that reveals his social identity. He answers that he stays in Entebbe on the shore of Lake Victoria next to State House. He says this with impunity, unable to resist seizing this opportunity to brag to Victoria (22). As a result, the girl responds that he sounds exciting to which Bat, oblivious of the fact that the girl is a decoy planted on him by Bazooka, replies boasting that the locale of his new home is so aesthetic. Bat also informs the young woman that he owns a rare car, a Boomerang, and invites her for a ride. She accepts and reveals that she is a woman of modest means who does not have a car of her own. She confesses to Bat that she has never seen such a beautiful car. His job, a big government house to behold, and a beautiful girl beside him, in addition to the car, complete his dream identity. Bat's character reveals a phallic mentality that looks down upon women as subordinates who cannot own property of their own and, hence must rely on men. He believes that his position and the trappings of power will endear Victoria to him.

The place of a woman is subtly depicted when it is revealed that for many of the men who stay in the north, they regard a second marriage to a young woman from the south as a symbol of status. The northerners regard young southern wives as trophies earned to complete their lives. The staunch polygamous northerners parade such wives to the public to show off. They treat women as items needed to enrich their lives. Ironically, Victoria is at the wedding as a plant set to stalk and lure him into a relationship. The General has sent Bat to the wedding not just to represent him, but also to entrap him using Victoria as the bait. Bat's advances to her makes the assignment even easier. They go to Bat's house and spend the night together:

As they enjoyed a nightcap, sitting on the sofa and looking out on to the garden, and later when they were in bed, Victoria felt something new, as if she was on the threshold of a new beginning. I can feel it in my bones, she said to herself, yes, I can. The fact that this rich man has taken the time to please me...is

a good sign. I am surprised by the way I feel because I originally came here to do a job and play a role (Isegawa 2004, p.23).

The narrator penetrates the private thoughts of Victoria to share her conscience with the readers. It is noted that the government has not only murdered and plundered the economy but also sexually abused young women such as Victoria in addition to misusing them as spy agents bugged to real and imagined enemies.

Victoria has had her share of a difficult life: in the past two years she has slept with many men who have met a bad end: to her, sex has been less anything else than a mere extension of her usual work—an offensive weapon just like a gun. If Bat is has survived this onslaught, it is only that she now feels differently and wants to get married. But for that to happen she has to disappoint General Bazooka, who has tasked her to bring Bat to “a hard fall.” Victoria reflects on her past life and concludes that General Bazooka has wasted her away. She desires to stop working for the State Research Bureau that assigns her its victims to start a new life with Bat who appears promising and capable enough of adding real value to her life as her husband. With the taste of Bat’s love, Victoria begins to liberate her mind that has hitherto been subjugated by the generals. She even entertains the thought of revealing the truth to Bat but she is not sure of the consequences of such a move. Victoria’s precarious situation, as a woman illustrates the betrayals and greed by both the nation-state—as represented by Bazooka and—family as later represented by Bat. This betrayal halts the development and freedom of the young woman symbolised most forcefully through her betrayal by these two male characters. Her identity has been imposed on her by external forces.

The military regime has not only dismembered individuals but also literally destroyed families. Victoria’s family exemplifies families that have had to bear the brunt of dictatorship. Her father is a hardworking man who has risen to success due to his dealing in business, particularly textile importation. Her mother—a traditionally submissive woman—had worked closely with her father. Her parents are responsible and play a crucial role in their local Protestant church. Then one day, something odd happens to the family that changes it for worse: customs officials ransack and find a box of rifles in a container of Victoria’s father’s imported fabric. Although her parents are innocent, her father is arrested, interrogated and jailed. Bat’s detention and torture epitomises the dehumanising nature of a dictatorship. One’s identity is grossly misrepresented by the abductions and torture that come with disappearances. The victims are traumatised to a point of rejecting themselves. Bat’s experience represents the disillusionment that bedevils post-independent African states. The post-independence euphoria has been dashed by a cabal of greedy and intolerant leadership, who have replaced it with disillusionment. In fact, the former white

coloniser has reinvented himself in the black skin under neo-colonialism, the subjection of one’s own people.

4. CONCLUSION

Isegawa’s Snakepit—just like his earlier novel, Abyssinian—is a fictional attempt by the author to represent a horrific cultural memory and extreme violence in a postcolonial setting. Isegawa’s approach elevates both the representational capacity of language to explore the place of both male and female genders in shaping their identities in the problematic post-colonial power relations. Most of the narrative is dedicated to trying to narrativise or ‘structure’ horror against innocent citizens into the various layers of the female and male stories. Whereas questions may be posed not only about the reliability of the omniscient narrator’s ability to narrate a credible story with so many characters whose thought processes and events have to be reported, such doubts are minimal since the various characters help to validate the story due to the multiple points-of-view from which they tell the story. These points-of-view help the reader to collaborate the various gendered experiences. Although the author does not bring up any strong female protagonists—assertive, consistent and with a cause to fight for and fulfill—he, however, weaves a narrative with chaotic, oppressive and phallic male characters at the apex of power, creating a need for alternative voices. These alternative voices, by implication, are the female voices. It is apparent that the cause of the conflict witnessed between the two major visible female characters, Victoria and Babit, is the domineering male-directed society. The flaws seen in the female characters are traced to their male counterparts who exploit them. The narrative “captures” the de-structuring nature of violence by exploring the experiences of various characters. Through a gendered identity construction of both male and female subjects and the tropes of language such as symbolism, imagery, and metaphor, Isegawa attempts to expose the devastating effects of years of dictatorship on Uganda through a gendered lens.

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