Food Symbolism and Cultural Identity in Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance.*

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ABSTRACT
The novel, *I Do Not Come to You By Mistake*, by Adaobi Tricia Uwaubani is a narrative of relationships and is set in a contemporary pervasive culture of internet fraud, popularly known in Nigeria as 419. It explores the nuanced interrelationship of identity, scarcity, moral decadence and food symbolism. This study sets out to discover how Nwaubani depicts how food serves as a symbol of identity, scarcity and moral decay and discovers that the socio-economic and ethical dilemma that the protagonist, Kingsley, faces are reflected in and symbolized by the foods that show the protagonist's evolution from an innocent young man to a conman who strips unsuspecting 'oyibos' of their money. Using Marxist and Postcolonial theories, this study interrogates how the have-nots navigate the world of poverty and unfounded wealth. It also emphasizes that opportunistic wealth, apart from changing the lifestyle of the protagonist and his ilk, eventuate the desperations that drive and propel the moral choices and compromises faced by young unemployed graduates who are victims of a failed system that celebrates conspicuous consumption. The study reveals how economic instability and uncertainties construe to erode traditional and cultural values while investing a get-rich-quick-without-legitimate-means mentality on the young. Nwaubani denotes this erosion in the protagonist's relationship with food; from the plain fare of his modest beginnings to the lavish and outlandish feast of corruption, the novelist portrays the fact that moral decay results from widespread inequality, results in the utter collapse of ethical boundaries, and a seemingly entrenched system of poverty in the society.

Key Words: Food, scarcity, poverty, moral decay, culture

Introduction

> The Women brought baskets full of foo-foo and pots of soup. There was so much food that many could not finish it. (Achebe- *Things Fall Apart*)
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> They bought him food, but he would not eat. 'I cannot eat the food of strangers' he said. Let my people bring me what I must eat. (Achebe's – *Arrow of God*)
>
> He picked at the cold remains of last night's meal, chewing as if contemplating the void. The art of eating leftovers, he declared, is the

highest form of voidancy (Soyinka – *The Interpreters*)
Champagne flowed like a dirty river. Canapés piled high, untouched, while outside beggars pressed their faces to the glass. (Soyinka *The Interpreters*)

Food is deeply embedded in the everyday fabric of human society: humans eat every day and sometimes set aside some days or period to eat special meals. It has physical and emotional properties, it engages all the senses, thus provokes sensory, emotive as well as cognitive associations. Food is static and evolutionary; it is ethnocentric and reveals the complexity of social, cultural and even political characteristics that situate a food within a boundary or cultural milieu. There are everyday foods like breakfast, lunch and supper, there are occasional and or celebratory meals like Christmas or Easter, wedding, burial meals. Each of these situational meals has degrees of symbolism which are either filial, social or religious.

Filial meals are everyday meals that are eaten at home among family members while Christmas, Easter, Wedding, etc. meals, though increasingly eaten at home, may not necessarily be eaten within family settings, but may include a wider audience, and may have shared and wider social and religious implications. In certain nations there are national meals which have national/historical undertones and implications as they are used to celebrate or mark a national event and are symbolic of a national rite of passage, or they represent the essential nature of the nation; every human occasion has a meal that is incorporated into it. Food is as much a personal/family issue as it is a national/international marker or identifier. Food is at once for sustenance as it is for aesthetics, a materialistic and class designator; essentially, food, to a great extent, designates a value system, and its consumption creates "a space in which people formulate and perform fundamental questions concerning their most substantial values and ends, their sense of who they are and who they should be" (Don Slater 282). L.B. Sebreila, MEPE Garavella and G.B. Nardoto see food as "shaped by culture and an outcome of the social structure in a given age" (3) thus situating food within culture-specific boundaries; food, therefore communicates identity. Umberto Pagano observes that "food choices and dietary practices are deeply intertwined with personal and collective identities. They serve as markers of cultural heritage, social status, and group affiliations… what we choose to eat or not eat becomes an expression of our identity" (141). As much as they are markers and identifiers, they also possess symbolic dimensions; some symbolize wealth and affluence while some symbolize want and penury, some symbolize provincialism while some symbolize 'wokeness' or cosmopolitanism, thus, the expression, "we are what we eat" remains poignant.

For the early human, the hunter-gather, food was essentially intrinsic – purely for sustenance; they needed food to sustain them as they navigated the extensive swathe of their world. The harsh reality of that period with its limitations in virtually every aspect of existence mandated that food be available, and great efforts were

brought to bear on the initiative to make food available; mobility was determined by availability or non-availability of food. Whenever food was exhausted in a particular location, the humans moved to the next location. And, also, weather conditions were implicated in the abundance and availability of food, as humans followed the weather and seasons in their search for food.

Today, in a more settled and structured setting, humans prepare food not merely for sustenance, but also for sport, for class, for religious, social statements, for regional and national pride, for expression of gender, and for symbolism as a marker of identity. In as much as food is an essential aspect of our humanity and also responsible for our health, one way or the other, its preparation and consumption today rests on several planks: our dishes reflect our cultural, class and personal idiosyncrasies. The food we eat, how we eat it and where we eat it reflect our standing in society. Fads have evolved around food, so much so that in today's influencer-instagrammable-tik-toked-internet-click-bait world, the food we prepare and eat and the pictures and videos that reflect them, determine the essence of food. The internet has made food more readily available and accessible with recipes, reviews, methods, constitution, nutritional information and evolution centered around food available at the click of the button. No food today is local or national. The internet has made dishes of far-flung localities to command international attention: *afang*, edikan *ikong*, *ofe nsala*, sushi, caviar, canapés, champagne, and so on, are distinctly regional foods/drinks that command international recognition and patronage today as a result of travel, the internet and globalization. Thus, for Audrey Soula and Zirari Hayat "in (the) context of mobility, migration and mixing of populations, food also travels and accompanies different populations in their movement… and food also allows for a mobility of knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills" (4) which, taken together, identify individuals and their culinary idiosyncrasies, or as Parama Roy explains, it provides "a sense of cultural plenitude" (163). Deborah Soyombo *et al* posit that "food plays a central role in social rituals and ceremonies in Africa, serving as a means of celebrating, mourning, and honoring important life events" (89) and Joydeb Patra, explaining Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, submits that "food choices" indicate both "individual preferences" and reflects "social class and cultural hierarchies" (3461).

The hierarchies of our global societies founded on history, culture and religion are sometimes explicated in the food we eat and they tell the stories of our evolution as a people; every dish we prepare and eat reflect our culture, reflect our class and reflect the trends evident in our global world. Roland Barthes avers that people have evolved peculiar ways of preparing and consuming their food to an extent that it impacts and illustrates their culture (29). Trends and fads and technology change the composition and presentation of our foods and the eating habits of the 21st century human. Food delineates experience and notates regional, national and international boundaries. Foods in the 21st century globalization delineate sovereignties as some foods mark group identities – Hotdog - American; Sushi – Japanese; Caviar – Russian; *Afang* – Ibibio; *Nsala* – Igbo; etc. Some foods

symbolize class and wealth – Truffles, caviar, Champagne, etc., mark wealth while '*cassaflakes*' with peanut and *akara*, instant noodles, etc., mark middle to low income class.

From being essentially for sustenance to be objectified, food today is no longer local: *Afan*g soup/*Ekpang Nkukwo*) of Ibibio/Nigeria descent is a delicacy in Maryland in America; Sushi/sake, a typically Japanese delicacy and drink is enjoyed in Abuja-Nigeria; MacDonald's is a house-hold name not only in Nigeria but around the world, as is Coca-Cola. These are evidences of globalization and neo-colonialism. For this study therefore, the principal question is, how have the formally colonized adapted their foods, food perception, food presentation, food appreciation and food habits to national and global trends? As a corollary to this question, how have our relationship with the foods we eat indicated our socio-cultural and historical praxis and class? Does the food we eat indicate our place in the global scheme of things?

The presentation and the nature of food eaten is an indication of human evolution; Mike Haralambos and Martin Holborn quoting Levi-Strauss, assert that food is used to notate "the transition of humans from being animals – which eat raw food, and are therefore part of nature - to being humans who are cultured and have the means to cook food" (680). In formerly colonized states how is that evolution notated? The discovery of fire by the early man and the evolution of fire, have changed the face and texture of food. As well as fire, political situations like colonialism and neo-colonialism have also shaped the food humans eat in particular societies. From the colonial period to today food has always been used as a tool of political control: certain foods and food eating practices were deemed savage, hence they were discouraged and those found engaging in them were shamed as barbaric; certain foods were encouraged and supported and certain eating practices (use of culinary tools) were encouraged as civilized.

Postcolonialism and Marxism highlight cultural identity and economic inequality, respectively, and both implicate colonialism as the foundation of identity crisis, inequality and moral decay in the personhood of the colonized. While Postcolonialism as a critical approach/theory examines the effects of colonialism on peoples and cultures by colonial powers and sees colonialism as culpable in the political, economic, social and cultural crisis experienced by the formerly colonized, Marxism is a social, political and economic philosophy that explores class relations and social conflict from a materialist look at history. As well as post-colonialism, Marxism sees societies as divided into two compartments. Frantz Fanon's postulate that "this world (is) divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species" (30) illustrates this division and highlights the separation of peoples into economic, racial and political classes.

From a Postcolonial point of view the two 'species' are the formerly colonized and the neo-colonialist, and from the Marxist point of view we have the haves and the have nots. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o avers that, "the real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth… the control, through culture, of how people perceived

themselves and their relationship to the world… the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religion, history, geography, education…" (1135). The colonialist understood that the best way to effect this control was effectively denigrate, abrade, abrogate and reject aspects of a people's culture and then impose a new foreign culture, deeming it as superior to the local culture. Thus Postcolonialism assesses the effect of colonialism and creates a body of knowledge around that effect, even as it creates theories in the explication of colonialism and the movements after colonialism.

Michael Ryan opines that, "many of the new cultural possibilities… arise from the situation of economic inequality that still characterizes relations between metropole and periphery, imperial center and former colony" (197). Relationship is a central factor in both Colonialism and Marxism and both define human engagements in term of how they relate politically and economically. Postcolonialism, therefore, assesses the effect of that relationship and avers that resulting from that relationship are such concepts as hybridity, creolization, mimicry, diaspora, ambiguity, etc. On the other hand Marxism assays relationship from a purely economic point of view, and sees relationship as existing at the level of bourgeoisie, proletariat, superstructure, social divides, etc. Between what Ryan refers to as "metropole and periphery," and between "imperial center and former colony" (97), postcolonialism is concerned with what Moore-Gilbert et al refer to as "self-definition", that is, a people's attempt to define themselves with acceptable frameworks that delineate their strengths rather than a discourse that degrades them based on the tone of their skin and the place of their 'civilization'.

Postcolonialism is an interaction that centers on class, race, gender, culture, and "a site of radical contestation and contestatory radicalism" (Gilbert-Moore 3). The site in question unveils the former colonized holding open the door of knowledge, culture, and determining what class signifies. Postcolonialism has diasporic undertones as the elite of the formerly colonized now reside in the 'metropole' and are now part of the neo-bourgeois class. Postcolonialism is anti-colonialism, it is the subaltern becoming represented in the discourses on culture, race, class, gender, etc. and their lack of voice within social systems that were formerly colonized. This lack of voice is especially highlighted in the words of Aime Cesaire,

> We did not know what Africa was, Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchmen with a black skin (72)

This condition and the entirety of the colonial and neo-colonial enterprise have created a collage of Africans with different wonts and proclivities; the African is always at work to fashion out what is expediently possible within the confines within which they must live.

The prologue of the novel, *I Do Not come to You by Chance*, opens in the village and a histography of the protagonist is laid bare. In it we trace his genealogy; his paternal grandfather was loathe to send his mother to school because "the … village experts said it was foolish for her father to consider sending a female child to secondary school. It was a waste of time; women did not need to know much book "(1). A visit by a white woman, the headmistress of the village school, Reverend Sister Xavier, who was outraged by that decision, soon changed his mind as he could not withstand "the white woman's nasal accent and fast talking. His attempts to convince the white woman that "I want her to learn how to cook and take care of a home … she has gone to primary school. She can read and write. That is enough" (2) is brushed aside when Reverend Xavier articulates why his daughter was special and thus should continue her education:

> I am sorry to disagree with you, but I don't think it's enough. Ozoemena is such a smart girl. She can go a very long way…. I've been living in Africa since the thirties. In all my over twenty years of missionary work here, I've come across very few young women as smart as your daughter…. All over the world, women are achieving great things. Some are doctors who treat all types of diseases, others have big positions with the government. You might be surprised to hear this, but in some countries, the person who rules over them is a woman (2)

Shocked by a number of factors arising from that confrontation with the white women, her father, Mr. Mbamalu, consents to allow her attend secondary school, where she excels.

Her excellence in secondary school becomes ultimately immaterial when, "after secondary, the topic of formal education was officially closed and Augustina (Ozoemena) was sent as an apprentice to her father's sister who was a successful tailor" (2). The opening lines of the novel sets the stage for a contest between the deeply ingrained patriarchal vein of the village and the superimposed colonial superstructure. Augustina at a very young age, in Innocence, faces the limiting effect of patriarchal praxis and is constrained to work within the ambits of its restriction.

In her aunt's home she grows in service and latterly encounters and is swallowed by the giddy lights of colonial mentality' when her aunt's husband's friend, Engineer, who had studied Engineering in the United Kingdom, who on his return home was working with government in Enugu, was to visit them in Umuahia. The furor of his impending visit, the majesty of that visit, where her aunt, her husband, their five children and Augustina "were dolled up in their Sunday best and waiting on the Veranda" (3) is a consequence of colonial mentality that venerates anything western. The furor of their preparation to host an august visitor, the carefully coiffed appearance which they affect to impress their visitor and be seen to be as correct, illustrate the "aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order"

(Fanon 29) and beyond that, a love all things Western; Engineer had visited the white man's land and had returned with the golden fleece and thus was an equivalent of the white man. He is an embodiment of white superiority and an avante guarde of the new colonialism.

The seduction of the metropole is strong; diasporic fugue, patriarchal lethargy and cultural complacency serve to elevate a common visit into magisterial pomp. Engineer is at once a representative image of the colonials, a hybrid, and a picture of culture gone aground in the sea of time. He and all his audience are not nationals and do not pretend to be; he is the new colonized. The picture which we see in them is the success of "the slippage from invaders to peaceful settler as a strategy within the projects of imperialism" (Alan Lawson 1217). Okonkwo's (Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) unambiguous dislike of the white man is replaced with the fawning obstreperousness of Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease,* Lazarus in Cyprian Ekwensi's *The Passport of Malam Ilia,* Chief Nanga and Odili in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Adah in Buchi Emechata's *Second Class Citizen,* and, of course, Augustina in our present text, to mention a few.

Where there are no white settlers, "natives" are prepared with Western education and returned to 'nativelands' where they now become the new 'colonialist'. The subject/captive audience is caught up in a rapt attention to every detail of the bourgeois class. Augustina's interior monologue illustrates this quite succinctly, "… she decided that even if Engineer's steps had not been leading to their courtyard, she would have crawled over broken glass, swum across seven oceans, and climbed seven mountains to see him that day…." (3) Engineer is objectified as both a very handsome man and a very learned 'been-to' and he 'berates' their fragile mind with the grandeur of the streets of and life in the UK. And "they opened their mouths and opened their eyes, and looked at themselves from one to the other" (3). Borrowing the words of Fanon, Engineer becomes a "privileged actor(s) with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon" (28) him. Rather than the glare decolonizing Engineer and his audience, it recolonizes them and puts them on a pedestal where they are celebrated and fawned upon. Even Teacher observes this when he cautions Engineer, "Engineer, I think you are taking things too far. You need to be careful that the ways of the white man don't make you mad. The way it is, people are already saying that you are no longer an African man". (*I Do Not*….4). Engineer ultimately sets a template of a future he envisages with Augustina:

> Our Children are going to be great. They're going to have the best education. They are going to be engineers and doctors and lawyers and scientists. They are going to have English names and they're going to speak English like the queen. And from now on, stop calling me Engineer. Call me Paulinus (10)

He ultimately marries her, they travel abroad and return home to Nigeria, and began to live the life that life throws at them. Chapter one begins with food:

> My taste buds had been hearing the smell of my mother's cooking and my stomach had started talking. Finally, she called out from the kitchen and my siblings rushed in to fetch their meals. Being the Opara of the family, I was entitled to certain privileges. As first son, I sat at the dining table and waited. My mother soon appeared carrying a broad plastic tray with an enamel bowl of water, a flat aluminum plate of garri, and a dainty ceramic bowl of egusi soup… the soup should have been a thick concoction of ukazi leaves, chunks of dried fish and boiled meat, red palm oil, magi cubes – all boiled together until they formed a juicy paste. But what I had in front of me were midget-sized piece of meat, bits of vegetable, and random specks of egusi, floating around a thin fluid that looked like a polluted stream… the piece of meat looked up at me and laughed… This pitiful presentation was a reflection of the circumstances in our home. Life was hard (12).

This rather long except constitute a synopsis of the first three paragraphs of chapter one and illustrates food as a veritable symbol of socio-economic markers and food insecurity of the typical Nigerian family in the 1980s to the aughties (the decade 2000 - 2009).

There is an implacable transition in the lives of the population; the hopes and dreams of the people which we see in Engineer's, "our children are going to be great…"(10) traipses into "the piece of meat looked up at me and laughed" (12) "… and how much like Sawdust our meals tested" (18). Their lofty dream is now objectified by "the circumstances in our home" (12). How did they get to the place where a traumatized piece of meat laughs of them? What happened to the high hopes that had created so much love in their household?

"Years of rising inflation without any corresponding increase in civil servant wages" and diabetes had revealed the tragedy of a life filled with "large quantities of the high-carbohydrate staple foods" and a diminishing value of personal income. At best a meal is termed 'melancholic'. However, while the economy of the family was existing at melancholic levels, Kingsley's (the opera) education experiences a quantum leap after being 'brainwashed' by his father to view education as 'the only way of putting one's potential to maximum use"(14) even when his aptitude for football was evident. The African has been brainwashed into accepting that Western education is the only source of wisdom and that any other innate potential outside education the African has is 'silly'.

A good education, a stubborn and resolute unyieldingness in career choice and several interviews for employment not materializing any job, Kingsley realizes that even with "paper qualifications and a high intelligence quotient, you usually needed to have long-leg"; You needed to know someone, or someone who knew someone, before you could access the most 'basic things"(26). In the valley of his travails there is a constant: food. When his spirit seems to flag his mother asked him, "why don't you go and have something to eat?"(27); here food seems to serve as a platform for mourning (Deborah Soyombo *et al,* 2024, p.89) and as a source of

strength and pacifier. His mother seems to say that when you are travailing, when you are being squashed by the circumstances of life, eat something. Even in the taxi traveling somewhere, "an abundantly bottomed lady… chomped her pungent breakfast of boiled eggs and bread with noisy gusto" (29).

His meeting with his fiancée's mother makes him begin to realize that life is more than food and academic excellence, especially because "other men are finding their way… other men know what and what to do to move ahead… Is it certificate that we shall eat? (41). He realizes that even his father, "with all his brilliance, was wallowing in poverty" (41). While carrying out this introspection his thoughts light on his mother's half-brother, Uncle Boniface, who had lived with them when he Kingsley was a child. Uncle Boniface had lived as a servant in their home; he had repeated classes and eventually could not finish his secondary education. However, Uncle Boniface had always been vocal about his drive to change his narrative in his actions and his imitation of the wealthy. While his uncle left to find his path in life and become extremely wealthy with choice real estate and extravagant life style and travels abroad, he Kingsley had graduated top of his class but ended up a pauper who could not even keep his women. Through a series of events: a religious epiphany where the story of Lazarus, Abraham and the rich man are served as an anecdote of prevailing socio-economic reality; Uncle Boniface's largesse to the family in the time of need, his father's illness draining the family, Kingsley seeks pastures new.

His father's utopian picture of Nigeria as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (61) pales into insignificance when he puts his life on a scale and discovers his,

> Father had given the very best years of his life to serving his country in the civil service. Today, retired and wasted, he had nothing to show for it … it was every Igbo man's dream to own a house in his homeland – a place where he could retire from the hustle and bustle of city life in the twilight of his years…(61)

Kingsley is despondent looking at his father and recalling that, like himself, his father was once a very brilliant Engineer who today has nothing to show for his brilliance and faith in the country he served diligently. His case is compounded when his father falls ill and has to stay in the hospital for a long stretch of time. Finance, the lack of financial capacity, seems to dog his every step: he loses Ola, his fiancée, because he did not have money to do the honorable thing; his father languishes in the hospital because his family lacks the finance to pay his hospital bills. Shunted into a cul-de-sac by dire financial straits he is constrained to reach out to his uncle who is called 'money miss road and also Cash Daddy.

In Cash Daddy's lair Kingsley discovers what wealth is all about, "…cream suit," "diamond- studded wristwatch", "sparkly chains… "alligator-skin shoes", "gold-plated walking stick". He is mocked for being "a university graduate" and has to see, first hand, some of the tricks of the 419 trade. His excursion to cash Daddy's home reveals astounding details:

> His rice bowl, as large as a bathroom washbasin, was filled to the brim. The rice was served with a bowl of tomato stew, a separate bowl of assorted meat, and a one-litre packet of Just Juice. He held his spoon like a shovel and clanged his teeth against the steel each time he shoved food into his mouth… (105)

His table is laden with a feast fit for kings and, though very generous, his money is very filthy. If his money is filthy his food is also filthy. Will he eat? Oduche in *Arrow of God* refuses to eat sacrificial food. Will Kingsley eat?

Cash Daddy offers Kingsley a job to work for him. Kingsley disdains the offer because he would not want to work with a 419er. His uncle sneers at the fact as he states: "you say you don't eat rats but you just want to taste only the tail"(116); the same 419 they disdained paid their hospital bills and kept the cold away from them. Even as they disdain his ill-gotten wealth, he disdains their education that cannot keep the debtors away.

By dint of circumstances beyond his control Kingsley finally is drafted into the 419 gang where he is schooled in the strategy of the kill' and the executioners dispassion; Cash Daddy schools him on why he should not sympathize with their victim: Americans have social security, so a loss of funds is not as tragic as it would have been for a Nigerian who has no social net to break their fall in the event of a bankruptcy; you do not need to pay cash for anything you buy as it is done in Nigeria; the slave trade, "who were the people behind it? And all this they stole from Africa, have they paid as back?" (144). And finally, Cash Daddy tells him that what is more important if seeking reparation on the basis of slave trade was not enough to make him see the logic behind 419, he should consider his family: "since you don't appreciate this opportunity God has given you to abolish poverty from your family once and for all, continue worrying about one Oyibo woman in America. Be there worrying about her and leave off your own sister and mother". (144)

Kingsley's journey into the murky world of internet scam, popularly known as 419 in Nigeria, is gradual and filled with a lot of introspection and empathy for the victims who are defrauded. However, cash Daddy's reorientation above serves to give him the conviction of his ways and this leads to him ultimately being quite good in it. Kingsley's assay into 419 is the author's way of illustrating how corruption, poverty and moral dilemmas conscript innocent Africans into fraud; Kinsley's family's struggles with poverty, an example of which is his description of his soup as a "thin fluid that looked like a polluted stream…"(12), is markedly seen in their meals. There is an evolution in their meals; from a juicy paste to a polluted stream. This also mirrors the evolution in his morality; from a morally sound young man to an amoral scammer who is not worried about the tears of his victims. Kingsley is a product of a broken system without safety nets for its members. He is a young man who grows up to see the discordant tones of the social system that caters to the rich while whipping the poor comatose. The moral evolution we notice in Kingsley as he is gradually and steadily sucked into the dark web of corruption is a mirror of the

decadence that we find in a society that does not seek to better and protect the lives of its teeming youth population.

A significant marker of that evolution is seen in food. The novel begins with food that is 'a juicy paste' and evolves to 'a polluted stream'; it rises in tone to Cash Daddy's "…rice bowl … as large as bathroom wash basin"; it plateaus at "…I visited home with the cooking gas and the wrappers and the rice, … I brought a variety of McVite's biscuits and Just Juice…" (150); airline food as "bland, raw and chalky. Could this really be the sort of western diet that my father preferred over African food?" (178); "Rubbish. You white people eat all sorts of rubbish. Anywhere I am in the world, I look for a Nigerian restaurant where I can go and eat real food" (184); "Cash Daddy proceeded to order almost everything on the menu, and shocked me with the genteelness of his feeding process. He took slow, small bites like a well-bred little girl and chewed without enlarging his mouth" (184). Cash Daddy's deliberateness in the food he chooses to eat when abroad is at once a marker of his national identity, his affected social class, and cultural personality; by virtue of his wide exposure to new cultures and 'civilization' Cash Daddy has 'transformed' and has thus formed a versatile taste incorporating food offerings in multiple cultures and class. Roland Barthes observes that, "food is not only a collection of product…it is also a system of communication, a body of image, a protocol of behavior" (24) and Cash Daddy's choice is at once cultural and political; while being open to try something new, it is a reinforcement of his cultural pride and identity as an affluent African who inveigles an opportunity to 'take back' what was stolen from him. Additionally, his choices, no matter how superficial or affected they are, at once "serve as a bastion of cultural preservation and resistance against homogenizing global practices" (Umberto Pagano, 2023, p. 148).

His actions echo Fanon when he observes that imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove (*Towards*... (53). What do we detect and what do we clinically remove. Yes, we can detect the prevailing conditions that forced people like Kingsley and Cash Daddy to resort to scams to eke out a living. Yes, we can also detect the inherent corruption that seems to support the scam industry. We can also detect the social corruption that encourages 419. We also detect the Merits of this world who also say no and reject everything that surrounds 419.

The constant reference to McVites, Just Juice, the various alligator shoes, slippers, gold this and gold that, various car brands, etc., are illustrative of a class of people whose conspicuous consumption indicate that they are not "focused on survival strategies and priorities of household budget" (Sebreila, Garavella and Nardoto 5) but instead deliberately set out to highlight their 'beento,' cosmopolitan and 'arrived' status. The girls Kingsley frolics with are recorded as bleaching their skins, and the scammers want Western artifacts to validate their status as the nouveau riche. Cultural imperialism is a reality that the rich in Africa eventuate and the poor desire. These are all attempts to 'civilize' themselves from their blackness. Food and skin tone are political statements of an intention to become the other. They

appropriate a third space that is neither African nor Western. There is an ambivalence, a hybridity and a mimicry that is palpably historical and cultural and symbolic of the struggles of the formerly colonized seeking a purchase on a reality foisted on them and which they cannot fathom but which they must make do with in any way that they can. Each attempt is an attempt to negotiate a culture, a personality, a nation and a community (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2) and an identity.

Kingsley's evolution is neither an issue of socialization nor of individualization but an issue of economy and poverty of the land; in a case where people are conscripted into a life of extreme poverty by prevailing economic and political conditions, when poverty is forced down the throat of a people because of the extreme corruption of the leaders, innocence will certainly give way to corruption. Human nature is in perpetual flux and as long as things are normal innocence will thrive. When things begin to go awry and remain so for a long sustained period corruption will set in. An injury that is not treated will become gangrenous and will result to amputation.

Kingsley regarded his position as *opara* (first son) very seriously. The thought of failing was anathema to him. His struggles, his loss of ethical convictions, his sacrifices, etc are all in a bid to be an *opara* fit to be called that name:

> Do you think this is the sort of life I wanted to live? Do you think I had much choice?!... Don't you realize that I made the sacrifice for you people?!... I am the *Opara*! I did it for you: Do you understand me?! (301).
>
> I'm tired of all this rubbish! I am tired! Whether you people appreciate it or not, I've been making all these sacrifices for the family. It's because of you. And all I get is insults and derogatory remarks (305).

Kingsley is incensed that his family members are not appreciative of the sacrifices he has made to create a buffer between poverty and them. His indignation results primarily from his apprehension of the strain his transition from a lovable young man to a conman had put on him. He recalls his youthful idealism and the financial implication of that idealism. He remembers the trudge, the endurance and the testing of his spirit and resolve. Each valley was negotiated with despondency, with fear, with shame. Each hill looked like a mirage and was approached with trepidation because it could disappear. The hills were fleeting illusions. But the valleys were ever present and concrete.

His final manifestation is not an epiphany, neither is it an apotheosis. It is the cry of a young man who represents many young men and women, whose nations and leaders take them on a daily ride or on the rollercoaster to hell and back. Kingsley's cry is the cry of innocence that has been raped into a troubling experience. 419 to him is not a dream job. It is the hand of a monkey in the jar of his life. It is the fly in an ointment.

Kingsley, even though firmly in the lion's den and dinning with the lion, is not unaware of the risks. He disdain's Cash Daddy's conspicuous consumption and excess. He juxtaposes his humble beginnings with its abject privations and the streams of symbolism they convey with the excess of the scammers' way and finds no solace there. His brief relationship with Merit shows how much he longed for the safely and purity of his former life. In her company he eschewed every links to his reality and would have given his eyetooth to not be labeled as a 419er. Losing her was significant and clearly shows where his heart really was.

Conclusion

Nwaubani uses food to mark and illustrate Kingsley's evolution as a symbolism of the painful evolution of a people and a nation; from the plain fare of his innocence to the excess fare of his experience, Proverbs 20:17 come to play in his life: "bread of deceit is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel"? The denunciations, rejections and the shame he feels in the company of his peers is like the proverbial gravel in his mouth. In Cash Daddy's den he had seen several instances where food was used to manipulate and recruit obedience, he had seen where wealth was a statement of mimicry, he had seen where food was symbolic of the global persona and acute materialism, and he had seen where food was religion. Essentially, therefore, food in *I Do Not come to You by Chance*, exist at many symbolic levels: identity, scarcity politics, and moral decay. In the novel there is a palpable relationship between identity, scarcity and moral decay; scarcity is that oil that soils the finger that results in all the fingers being soiled. It is the fly in the ointment that repudiates the ointment. Scarcity, poverty, privision or whatever name it is called, is the essential ingredient that can turn a lovable young man into a crook as we see represented in the life of Kingsley: the class divides are essentialized by scarcity and Nwaubani uses food to symbolize conspicuous consumption, greed, desire, poverty, humility, and all of these direct the moral compass of the novel. When they are all taken together they give us insight into a people's identity and culture, and as Cash Daddy indicates food not only identifies an individual, but eventuates the entirety of the individual's persona.

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