

Negotiating Identity: Sexuality and Gender in Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017)

Nurayn Fola Alimi
University of Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

“Sexuality” and “gender” are two cultural indexes regarded by gender and culture theorists as well as their allied feminist critics as fundamental to the construction of the Self. It could be observed however that, the spaces and platforms for the construction of identity are diverse and complex when viewed from the psychosocial platform. In this discussion, I elect to interrogate Olumide Popoola’s *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) as a textual space where sexuality and gender indexes are yoked within psychosocial experiences to complexly negotiate personal identity. I engage the concepts “sexuality” and “gender” with the aim to use these as tools to examine the construction of an identity for a transgender African in diaspora in the novel. “Place of negotiation” and “self-discovery” are analytical variables understood in this discussion as inherent in “the analytic third” espoused by the psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden, illustrating also “the third space of enunciation” explained by the postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha. Thus, standing on a fair blend of mainstream psychoanalytic and postcolonial critical platforms, I read *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) as a postcolonial diaspora text-space where identity becomes a phenomenon emerging through a psychosocial process for the diasporic African person. In this novel, the protagonist's identity emerges through a process that unfolds within a space of complex dialectic tensions between his sexuality consciousness, his gender category unconscious, and the sociocultural environment. In this essay I conclude that sexuality and gender, as they play significant role alongside the protagonist's experience of cultural dispersal, are fundamental indexes for mapping his identity and self-discovery as an African in a diasporic space.

Keywords: self-discovery, gender, identity, sexuality, the analytic third, the third space

Introduction

The idea of an African diaspora, particularly when understood in the context of its connection with the people of African descent through Pan Africanism, has been located within the discourse of either transatlantic, internationalism, or transnational studies (Palmer, 2000; Zeleza, 2005; Edozie, 2012). Even though the key word “diaspora” in this phrase has been contested, in terms of its methodological constituents and “conceptual difficulties” (Zeleza, 2005, p. 2), “diaspora” has been used in contemporary postcolonial discourse within the understanding of transnational or global geographic dislocation and cross-cultural displacement. Fundamentally, diaspora discourse provides the platform to reflect on the developments in cultural and human evolution across civilizations. Scholars such as Rogers Brubaker, on the strength of global culture, have for instance considered “diaspora” to mean “Boundaries crossing people” (Adamson, 2008).

In the context of diaspora studies, knowledge about the exemplifications of the diasporic individual or group experiences draws attention to the interdependent relationship between culture, identity, sexuality and gender conflicts, and the spaces for their reconciliations and or (re)negotiations. This knowledge about the diverse (often complex) meaning of Diaspora is what I take in this discussion as fundamental to understanding postmodern perspectives about the discourse of identity construction. My basic premise is that, through studies and reflections on the idea of diaspora, culture, gender, and sexuality issues thrive properly with the subject of postcoloniality. By this I therefore propose to expand the discourse by calling attention to the postcolonial body as crucial in the context of the cross currents highlighting the intersections between the experiences of colonialism and migration. To argue this, I have elected to interrogate Olumide Popoola’s coming-of-age novel *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) as a textual space where sexuality and gender indexes are yoked with cultural and social experiences to negotiate identity in complex ways. In other words, I engage the concepts “sexuality” and “gender” with the aim of using their significations to interrogate the construction of identity for a transgender body of the African diaspora protagonist, Karl, of the novel.

The Context of *When We Speak of Nothing* as a Diaspora Novel

The immediate socio-cultural context of the diasporic novel are the cultural exigencies triggered by globalism and globalisation. With the rise of globalism, particularly its social and cultural dimensions, understanding the complexities surrounding the idea of a global culture has led scholars to espouse postmodern approaches that, while seeking to clarify the concept of identity, have only made it even more problematic. In a sense, part of the problem created by globalism is how it has itself facilitated the presence of diasporas, across the global spaces, whose experiences have been marked by destabilization and fragmentation of homes, communities, nations and most significantly the idea of identity. The growth of globalism, when specifically applied to diasporic experiences, complicates the representation of cultural experiences as a result of the blurred boundaries that have emerged which trouble ideas of nationalism, individual or group identity. By its constant-assumed and expanding position with new complexities (Gonzalez, 2010, p. 34) globalism has culminated in what Seyhan Azade in *Writing Outside the Nation* (2001) observes as creating opportunities for diasporas to emerge, survive and thrive. Indeed, for Azade the dynamics of globalism and globalisation harness a broad spectrum of ideas concerning the platforms where the encounters between “the self” and “the Others” who are distant from one another are determined by mutual alterity (2001, p. 18). Diasporic experiences compel the re-organization of nations and the sense of nationalism by

being instrumental to (re)configuring, for instance, the intersections of sexuality and gender with self-identity and citizenship. To be sure, the ideas of origin, home, and place of belonging, as it turns out in the process of the creation of global diasporic cultural realities and identity or identities, have become central to diasporic experiences because they can be deployed to interrogate the sense of “in-betweenness” that individuals and groups often find difficult to communicate. To put it succinctly globalism, transcending the physical border crossing, maps out a complex cultural space where the notion of identity is negotiated or renegotiated, which examples of the diaspora novel have used as a template to develop their narratives.

The Norwegian Anthropologist, Fredrick Barth submits that identity can be mapped not only by discarding of home/local culture to assimilate the culture of the locals, by emphasizing/dwelling on the similarities between the new and the old culture, disregarding the differences, but also by forging an “identity” through the differences suggested by the old and new experiences (p. 34). From this, one can discern that many diasporic individuals are constantly in a state of identity flux, since they are often forced to consciously or unconsciously express different types of self-awareness as dictated mostly by the participant's “new culture”. There is no doubt that diasporic individuals are in a constant state of identity flux, one that is experienced psychosocially through their quests for the expression of self by negotiation or renegotiation. An important point here is how the dominant culture will often dictate the status for self-identification. It is in the midst of expressing the identity flux experience that many diasporas discover how the tangent cultural structure has come to be responsible for the walls of conflicting ideas that propel the creation of a space that must be negotiated; space within which the individual self can be constructed.

Culture, according to Anthony P. Cohen in “Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist View” (1993) is the vehicle through which individuals and groups make meaning of the self (p. 197). In Cohen's view, particularly his linking of symbols with the means of disseminating culture, the role of linguistic reconstructions (as symbols) in the evaluation of what is drafted into the formation and acceptance of self becomes fundamental. After all, the complexities trailing the use of symbolic terminologies and concepts as a result of cultural differences and variations play a vital role in the psychology of cultural reconciliation and acceptance by individuals and groups. A similar inference to Cohen's view can be drawn from Winnicott's position that an individual is often torn between the true self and the false self, which translates to the resultant desire for a defense; especially in an environment that does not accommodate it (Winnicott, 1960, p. 582).

The views emerging from the body of knowledge about the relationship between globalism, globalisation, and culture cumulatively understood, provide us with the context of the argument in this essay that the diasporic individual projected in Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017), Karl – the protagonist of the novel – is captured to exist in a state of “in-betweenness” (which refers to the “Third”, a self). It is argued here that the author created a process of dialectic cultural tension through which Karl's identity emerges. These tensions are facilitated by his quest for the proper knowledge of his identity, gender, and his African roots. Not only that, Karl's quest for proper knowledge about identity, it is observed, contextualises the delineation of the social condition that validates his experiences of cultural dispersal while sojourning in Africa and living in London.

By and large, the discourse of diasporic prose narrative has come to entail the literary projection of diverse postmodern experiences. These experiences have been sometimes expressed cumulatively as “culture shock.” William Safran in his work “Diaspora in Modern Societies:

Myths of Homeland and Return” identifies six features of diaspora which are useful for the discussion of any diasporic focused text. These features are dispersal, collective memory, loss and exile, alienation, respect and longing for homeland (Safran, 2018, pp. 65–67). Safran's observations emphasize the crucial shift of interest from the physical to the psychosocial nuances that highlight diasporic experiences of individuals in many diasporic-themed novels. The diasporic African prose fiction has seemingly placed a premium on aspects of these African diasporic experiences, thereby serving as a text-space for interrogating the ever-unsettled debates about the true representation of the African experience. In other words, a good number of African diaspora novels represent tangible and intangible psychosocial realities confronting Africans living as part of a diasporic community. Amongst other things, African diasporic writers have struggled to project experiences that not only bare links with African colonial experiences but also project the playing field of sociocultural events happening beyond those experiences. Many of these writers have shown how race, gender, ethnicity and social class have taken a towering space amidst the realities that affect the psychological perceptions of the identities of most diasporic characters. Positioned as historical and socio-cultural concepts, gender, race, ethnicity and social class are constructed in many diaspora text spaces against the background of the realities facing the individual in a globalised world that aims at a collective yet dispersed identity. Indeed, as this article reveals through an analysis of the lead character's experience of the concepts of gender and the body in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017), the African diasporic novel has a penchant for interrogating the psychosocial journeys individuals have to embark upon in their quest to fit in; men and women who are looking for a space of belonging and to have a sense of self and identity in a “new” place.

When We Speak of Nothing (2017) tells a compelling story of two boys, Karl and Abu who live in the inner city estates of London. On the surface, the story captures the experiences of Karl's and Abu's common struggles to cope with racism and gender conflicts. Alongside these intriguing themes, the novel tangentially explores the issue of restricted economic opportunities in London on the part of their parents. Karl, on whom the narrative takes a special focus, is a transgender teenager whose mother is an African migrant and an emotionally unstable character. Karl's struggles with gender and identity discrimination in a transnational space as well as how various cultural categories figure in his journey towards self-discovery provide the narrative context for the novel's concerns with the experiences of sexuality, gender, and identity. Abu, Karl's best friend whose parents are migrants from the Middle East, battles with self-identity in the process of a quest towards wholeness in the midst of peer and racial pressures.

The story begins with a scene in which Karl and Abu are harassed and bullied by “three wannabe guys they knew from sixth form” (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 7). This scene projects the social stigmatization that both boys suffer in the streets of London. Abu prides himself as the manlier of the two friends with a self-ordained obligation to protect Karl from the bully wannabes. Karl's feeling of insecurity, with himself and with the social milieu; particularly his internal gender conflict and his feeling of incompleteness with how he eventually negotiates these experiences to reach a stage of self completeness as a growing adult are also narrated across the text. The feeling of gender incompleteness coupled with the sociocultural pressure in the city of London drive him to latch onto an opportunity to go to Africa. This opportunity is provided to allow him to meet his father, Adebango for the first time since he was born and it comes as he discovers a letter from Uncle Tunde, his father's brother. This communication and connection is facilitated by Geoffrey, his guardian and allotted social service caregiver, who is appointed to manage Karl through his sex change process. Port Harcourt, Nigeria becomes the space where his anticipation of attaining cultural wholeness

begins to germinate. This is at first a nightmarish experience for him as Adebajo rejects Karl's transgender body. Adebajo is expecting to see a girl but is disappointed by what he sees; a boy. It is only through his encounter and social meetings with other characters in the novel including John, his father's driver, Uncle Tunde, Janoma, and Nakale, that he is able to forge a sense of self. Through these characters his quest for sexuality and identity wholeness is completed towards the conclusion of the narrative.

Negotiating Identity through the Body, Sexuality and Gender Indexes in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017)

The question of the malleability of identity in the conflict of self-construction and negation, as informed by the cultural and other dialectic tensions projected in the diasporic space, has engaged the interest of both the literary critic and literary theoreticians. In paraphrasing Barth's argument on this, Adelaida Reyes (2014) notes that:

... perceptions set off the interplay between human actors who enact their differences and, in so doing, create a boundary between Self and Other, between belonging and non-belonging. The Self is thus defined through differentiation from an Other, in an environment or a context in which their perception of each other as different is articulated, communicated and enacted (p. 3).

Identity creation in any diasporic environment such as the London environment in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) is projected as transcending any form of cultural assertions that might be instigated by a straightforward case of migration. One way in which this is observed in Popoola's novel is to pay attention to how sexuality and gender have been implicated as fundamental cultural indexes in the construction of Karl's body. As cultural ideals, sexuality and gender have become fields of exploration in diasporic prose, they are often projected within the purview of the body. This is particularly the case when identity construction is projected for gender negotiation or renegotiation. It is in this light that the issue of identity in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) is explored within the framework of the psychosocial relationship of sexuality, gender and the body, leading theoretically to the unraveling of how these concepts are constructed and negotiated. This is a plausible theoretical argument that has been imaginatively engaged in many diasporic novels. Thus, in this novel Karl's sexuality and gender are assumed to have been propelled by the dynamics of cultural oppositions or of the foreign structures underscoring the reality of his body. The body, it is shown in the case of the protagonist responds to, or more appropriately, resists the assaults of neocolonialism, affirming the position that the body is a result of an effect rather than a terminus.

In *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) Popoola conceptualizes, with the delineation of Karl's character, the idea of bodily negotiations as a process rather than as a condition for understanding identity. Indeed, the protagonist's body takes on formed relationships and socio-cultural structures that encompasses much more than what might be normally assumed in cultural discourses. This process leads to the full realization, the completeness of his gender category and ultimately his identity. The postcolonial transgender body which Karl parades in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) is stereotypically a queer space. Thus, the idea of transgender itself is traded within the province of a combination of biological and psychosocial essentialisms in the novel. Karl's internal conflict develops out of the prevailing psychosocial challenges and this significantly affects the sort of relationship and bonding he eventually shares with his family members and his friends. Geoffrey, Karl's mother, in addition to his

friend Abu, and Abu's parents are also supportive of his transformation. The implication of the support Karl receives from those close to him in his immediate social life help to resolve his internal conflict concerning the acceptance of his body and his choice of biological gender category. Karl's body becomes a point of tension, placed as core in the delineation of his transgender character and the process of the discovery of his identity. *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017), to this end, imaginatively insinuates the fluidity of sexuality and bodily representation as against the definition of the body as "The entire physical structure of a human being" (p. 133). It is important to reiterate the fact that the conflict of perceptions, which trails Karl's body in the novel, is geared towards validating the dynamics of social construction and not stemming in biological essentialism. The question remains, however, as to whether there is a part of Karl that is still largely female owing to his display of traditionally feminine behavioral patterns.

Karl's reluctance towards Janoma on their first sexual encounter is evident of his conflict with himself. With him and Janoma alone in Janoma's aunt's small shop, for the first time in his life, his true sexual self is triggered when he finds his "body switched on, head burning up":

And the burning in his throat. The burning that just wouldn't leave since Janoma had taken his hand a few days ago when they were sitting together in the taxi. The burning that had returned when she leaned on him at Nakale's party (*When We Speak of Nothing*, pp. 170-171).

This encounter is fundamental in the discussion of the process of the negotiation of both his body and his sexuality to arrive at the construction of his identity. The encounter can be regarded as his moment of transfiguration because it reflects a moment when he ceases to see himself as a "freak" but rather as a human being- a man. The warmth with which he is accepted by Janoma in Port Harcourt goes a long way to concretize Karl's conviction that Nigeria is a country where he can be himself without discrimination or segregation. Indeed, he comes to the full knowledge of himself; Nigeria becomes a cultural space of reconciliation after his encounter with Janoma and other people.

Furthermore, the moment captures the point of self-recognition (in a psychosocial sense). This form of self-recognition itself becomes a diasporic space where the self requires reconciliation in order to assume a relatable position in the process of achieving complete wholeness in society. The narrator therefore comments on, and captures, this experience thus: "The roads we travel on in the end have to get to one point or the other, otherwise it would be levitating." (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 177). Karl's sexual relationship with Janoma transcends a stage of uncertainty to an experience of confidence in a way that translates into positive acceptance of his other relationships. He is subsequently able to confront his mother about his father and about the insecurities he feels about being a transgender person on the streets of London without a mother to give him emotional support. The scenario – Karl's sexual encounter with Janoma – similarly reveals the space of the Body politics and negotiation that the postcolonial body is opened to in the process of self-formation. Critically, this scenario is playing out in a diasporic space where subjects are fluid and unstable and individuals are free to choose who they want to be. It must be reckoned therefore that, the freedom of choice open for Karl to choose is both liberating and troubling. It is liberating in the sense that it provides a room for him to attain self-realization but troubling because of the increased emotional distress, insecurities and the time for him to analyze the available choices and to minimize the risks associated with those choices. One can say also that, this freedom is what Karl utilizes to allow

him confront the internal conflict of self, and consequently the resolve to threads of being a nonconformist. As he says when he speaks with his father about his being transgender, “once you make dramatic statements with your body, you have to go there, all the way” (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 135).

Frenk (2011) is of the opinion that,

By self we mean the fundamental manner in which reality is subjectively experienced [...] by models of self I mean the understanding people have of themselves as individuals as there are manners in which to experience and interpret reality (p. 19).

According to Frenk, the search for the true self implies that the individual gradually loses connection to the framework within which to locate the Self and this has psychological cost (2011, p. 20). Thus, Karl sorts out his own self in tandem with the idea of Thomas Ogden’s psychoanalytical prescription that “the analytic third” is a subject that has to be sorted out. Karl’s body encompasses the complex contentions that influence his formation of the self and the discovery of his gender. He romances and embraces the concept of his body in a new environment, a place where he could be without the knowledge of his conflicted body announcing his presence.

For the first time in my life I’m able to walk around and just be. No hassle, no questions. No pity or sympathy or harassment or being beaten up. Just me...Bloody fucking me. *The first time* (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 142)

Surprisingly, it is in Nigeria that, that knowledge of his negotiated or constructed body is received with normalcy. Mena, the woman who sells food at John’s house, deduces Karl’s secret and she does not treat him as a lesser person because of it, nor does Nakale and most importantly, Janoma, with whom he explores his sexuality and forges a self-identity. In other words, Karl discovers a fundamental part of himself in Nigeria amidst the relationships and bonding he forms with some unexpected characters. He finds Nigeria a place where he could be himself, “without the bloody streets telling me otherwise” (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 209).

The position from which the diasporic individual makes claims to the construction of a perceptive, identifiable self has been variously called the “third space” by post-colonial theorist Homi. K. Bhabha, the “analytic space or third” by Ogden. Another term is the “liquid space of Slippage” used by Gayatri Spivak. Within these variations, the fluidity of the self-space remains constant at the point of negotiation from the angle of postcolonial theorists. Yet, the identity of the individual discovered within this space can be created and re-created to reflect a cause and effect relationship when viewed from the psychoanalytic perspective. Thus, as a psychoanalyst, Ogden in *The Location of the Subject* (1991) refers to this construction process as the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious:

It is the experience of doing battle with one’s static self-identity through the recognition of subjectivity (a human I-ness) that is the other to oneself...the perception of the other I-ness once perceived will not allow us to remain who we were and we cannot rest until we have somehow come to terms with its assault on who we have been prior to being interrupted by it (p. 2).

Theoretically, the formation of the self, in Ogden's view refers to the self and the “subject” as a decentered psychoanalytic subject whose formation process goes through a dialectic interplay between the conscious and the unconscious. Ogden's proposition sufficiently exposes the varying angles of identity negotiation and realization, where socio-cultural structures are confronted towards the creation of individuality and the true self. In *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) this, in fact, goes beyond fixed and pre-determined point within the cultural structures experienced by the protagonist in the process of his travelling from London to Nigeria. Karl's willingness to embark on a journey to meet his biological father creates the very opportunity needed to both consciously and unconsciously realize self-discovery and self-identity; to locate affirmation as a transgender person. Yet, the fluidity of the space between Karl's conscious and unconscious mind situates him appropriately in a queer category of identity. His encounters with people and their reception of his physical body provoke his re-evaluation of popular beliefs and the cultural and social values expressed by the majority, which ultimately harnesses the cultural fault lines in his perceptions about himself as a transgender individual into a single minority sexual category. Moreover, it contributes to the structural build of his identity in social, physical and psychological terms.

The ground upon which the novel ultimately makes demand of self-discovery is therefore beyond biological, political or economic contingencies. Rather, it is psychological and social simultaneously, translating to and revealing a more personal experience of the process of gendering than a communal one. Judith Butler, postulating on the performativity of both gender and sexuality has, after all, call attention to the allowance provided for the negotiation of these ideas in the space of socio-cultural interactions (1993, p. 101). Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) believes that gender as sex is constructed; that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one and can also assume another gender” (p. 109). Butler further observes that the body is a situation, a passive medium on which cultural meanings are ascribed, redefining femininity and masculinity as instruments through which an appropriative and interpretive will determine a cultural meaning for itself (1993, p. 101). The body is thus represented in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) as Butler conceives of it; an untouched foundation all the more powerful for interpretations outside culture (1993, p. 101).

No doubt *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) explores the potential relationship between love and sexuality. But what makes this relationship more interesting, in this example, is the way in which Popoola captures the process of Karl's and Abu's attainments of self-discovery. Karl and Abu are both troubled teens who find a sense of accomplishment and self when they each fall for their respective love interests in the novel. Karl's personal conflict about his gender, his unemotionally available mother, a father that throws out the idea of bonding with him because of his gender identity and the pressure of street bullies all contribute to the evolution of his true self. Abu stays back in London when Karl goes in search of his father in Port Harcourt. While Karl is in Nigeria, Abu, is pressured by a new group of friends as he desperately desires an image that is street credible. His emotional divorce from his parents and friends stems out of his need to have a sense of belonging. The narrator informs us: “His face wasn't just stubborn: there was hurt there. Something that everyone seemed to miss had bubbled up to the surface” (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 124). He fights the urge to be himself in the midst of the chaos and is eventually tied to activities that spiral out of control after the killing of Mark Duggan, a black man (an armed drug dealer) who was shot dead by the police in Tottenham. Eventually, he begins to build a relationship with Nalini when they work on Mary Prince for a term paper. His growing love for Nalini prompts him to work towards being a better person and it is only after he comes out of the hospital that their relationship takes form. His relationship with Nalini positively takes him away from the demand of the streets; of a basic desire

to be all muscle but no emotion.

Similarly, Karl's metamorphosis starts off a relationship with Janoma. In Nigeria, she guides him into embracing his sexuality in such a way that he does not feel the need to doubt himself:

Karl would leave wherever he was, hit the asphalt and let it lift him up and off the ground because he needed air. Air between his body and the world so his body could leave the dirt underneath. The stuff that fit nowhere. (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 191)

On Karl's return to London, he is trailed by changes that are built up in him, changes from his stay in Port Harcourt. When Janoma talks to him, she too confirms that he has changed, becoming more assertive, confident and precise with things that are of concern to him. He understands himself beyond his father and unflinchingly tells his mother about Janoma. Karl's relationship with Janoma has expanded his view beyond the junction, to see beyond the conflict of his gender to the discovery of himself because "Junctions are not made for all-round visions but for choosing the way ahead" (*When We Speak of Nothing*, p. 82).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the body as a queer space works along with the structure of a diasporic tension to aid the process of self-discovery and identity in *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017). Sexuality and gender in the novel adopt a psychosocial position that goes beyond mere social assertion to an individual quest. Though the societies and structures with which the characters interact are not dismissed, sexuality and gender are put in the spotlight as indexes for determining the wholeness of identity. The concepts "sexuality" and "gender" are deployed as the fundamental indexes in the exploration of the concept of identity such that the social, physical and psychological positioning of the characters becomes the priority. The idea of the body and sexuality are thus fundamentally embedded in the relationship of the characters within spaces that can be (re)negotiated.

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Corresponding author: Nurayn Fola Alimi

Contact email: fnurayn@unilag.edu.ng