LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

The Immobilised Family: Home, Homeland and Domopolitics in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*

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Abstract:

This article draws on Walters' concept of 'domopolitics' (2014) to discuss how the home is used as a means to create and maintain borders and manage mobility in the nation-state. The aspiration of ruling a state like a home is tied to patriarchal structures of control and the implicit gendering of home. In my literary analysis, I apply these ideas to Chigozie Obioma's debut novel *The Fishermen*, published in 2015 and a finalist for the Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel deals with the historical burden of colonial borders and postcolonial conflicts in contemporary Nigeria by presenting a problematic father figure and the norms and relations that he establishes within the household. The patriarch attempts to preserve the space of the home by immobilising his family through normative values and constraints on personal freedom. In its critique of such static and constricting family structures, the novel points towards the weaknesses of paternalistic ideas of the nation-state and a controlling domopolitics. The novel ultimately de-naturalises easy mappings of home and homeland, disrupting the home as a synecdoche of the nation as well as political ideals of strong male leadership. Instead of propagating homeland as genetic belonging, the novel stages belonging as multiple and therefore mobile acts of narration through its extensive use of parables.

Keywords: home and homeland; domopolitics; family; nationalism; Nigerian literature; Chigozie Obioma.

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On 12 July 1947, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Nnamdi Azikiwe, the leading figure of Nigeria's push for independence from Britain, was visiting London to demand self-government. The short article, '"Zik" Seeks Home Rule for Nigeria', outlines the plans that Azikiwe proposed for Nigeria in a rather condescending and ironic tone and explains that the National Council of Nigeria is 'modelled on the Indian Congress Party' (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1947: 3). The Indian Congress Party had asked for Indian Home Rule in the early twentieth century and had modelled their political goals on the Irish Home Rule movement of the late nineteenth century (see Brasted 1980).

In the article, the home is a metaphor to facilitate the reader's understanding of political goals pursued by anti-colonial movements across the globe, although the newspaper is keen to imply that these goals are unrealistic and childish. The private home and people's desire to be in control of it are used to explain political movements' bids for control over a national homeland. What is thus being established is a tight connection between individual citizens' experiences of their own homes, the nation and issues of control, a connection that revolves around home as a space shaped by questions of rule and its im/possibility.

Research on political discourses of control and the securitisation of the nation-state has contributed to a better understanding of such strategies. William Walters felicitously calls the aspiration to 'govern the state like a home' (2004: 237) domopolitics. Only if the home already is a space of rule, control and power politics can it turn into a model for the nation-state. This also means that family relations within the home are a site of public intervention and national scrutiny, including power structures between genders and generations, a fact that is evoked by images of a mother country and her children's will to become independent. Imaginaries of home become an arena for contesting voices precisely because domopolitics uses a distinct, yet naturalised model of home to explain the need for state control to the individual citizen.

In my paper, I concentrate on this nexus of home, control, power politics and family in literary representations of homeplaces in postcolonial Nigeria: What are the power structures and control mechanisms within the home? How do these structures play into ideas about the postcolonial nation, its reproduction and its management? How are relations between family members constructed, imagined and evaluated? And finally, what role do specific aesthetic strategies play in challenging patriarchal domopolitics?

The notion of domopolitics can help to shed light on such questions in the context of this special issue. Domopolitics is geared towards regulating mobilities while enlisting imaginaries of home to achieve and legitimise this regulation of mobility in the first place. The literary representation of Nigeria's fate as a nation is a salient example for domopolitics because it shows how, in the postcolonial context, home and control are tightly related to each other via images of the (national) family. At the same time, literature can provide alternative imaginaries that dissociate home from control and problematise easy mappings of 'home' onto 'homeland'.

In the following, I want to analyse in more detail how literary texts use representations of family life and the power structures within the home to work towards such a critique of home and homeland as spaces of control. Specifically, the article will focus on Chigozie Obioma's debut novel *The Fishermen*, first published in 2015. The novel

deals with the historical burden of colonial violence and postcolonial conflicts in contemporary Nigeria by presenting a problematic father figure and the norms and relations that he establishes within the household. The patriarch attempts to preserve the space of the home by immobilising his family through normative values and constraints on personal freedom. In that respect, he rules his home like a state. Mobility in the sense of the freedom to develop is denied to the individual despite the father's commitment to discourses of growth and education. In its critique of such a constricting domopolitics, the novel points towards the weaknesses of organic, genetic ideas of the nation-state. The novel de-naturalises seemingly biologically given roles within the home and mobilises the family relations that the father had previously tried to fix and consolidate. Consequently, it also de-naturalises easy mappings of home and homeland, disrupting the utilization of home as a synecdoche of the nation and the father as the benevolent head of state. However, Obioma equally acknowledges the emotional pull of metaphors of home and family for national, collective imaginaries, calling for a critical awareness and reformulation rather than an outright repudiation of such metaphors. As a whole, the novel thus gives a provocative answer to Anne McClintock's question: 'Can the iconography of the family be retained as the figure for national unity, or must an alternative, radical iconography be developed?' (1997: 110). Both, the narrative suggests in its reinterpretation of the meanings and imaginaries of home and family.

I will embed my reading of Obioma's novel within the context of contemporary Nigerian fiction and its discussion of home and homeland, asking why issues of home have been crucial as well as fraught within a postcolonial context. But first, the mapping of home and homeland discussed above will be related to the use of family metaphors in nationalist discourse and to Walters' concept of domopolitics. In this section, I initially focus on Western idea(l)s of nationhood because these were strongly disseminated throughout colonised countries, thus shaping their cultural imaginaries.

Home, Family and the Normative Order of the Homeland

Western painting, literature and other art forms have a long tradition of representing the 'naturally' ordered distribution of physical and intellectual male work and the reproductive and domestic work of women. In such representations, '[t]he family home appears as an integral location for imagining the nation as a whole' (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 140). Images of the family are used to attach communities and individuals to their homelands, first and foremost emotionally, making it unnecessary to explain why exactly people's feelings for their homeplaces should seamlessly extend to their national community. In this logic, '[h]ouses are assumed to become homes because they provide and become the environment within which family relationships – close, private, and intimate – are located' (Bowlby, Gregory and McKie 1997: 344). A house without a family does not seem to be a real home and, in turn, a national community devoid of kinship ties does not seem to be a homeland. For a critique of organic images of belonging, it is therefore crucial to question such naturalising mappings of home and homeland and to disrupt the idea that the home is a straightforward 'synecdoche for the nation' (Shafi 2012: 170) or that nations are organically existing units that bring people together (see McClintock 1997: 89).

The family as a framework for collective belonging has a successful history in the discourse of nations and nationalisms. Already in its etymology, the nation is associated with metaphors of genetic, biological or familial links (see McClintock 1997: 90-1; Loomba 2002: 22-6). Such a concept of the nation as genetic fate and domestic genealogy, as something you are born with, creates a strong tie between the individual citizen and the nation, and this tie is seen as inescapable and unchosen (see Anderson 1983/2006: 143). This ideological framework is closely linked to ideas of gender and hierarchy and has material effects such as unequal access to political participation or differences in legal status within the family and society. The family trope therefore offers a rhetorical shorthand for sanctioning social, cultural and political hierarchies within a putative organic unity of shared interests.

Previous studies have predominantly tied this bond between family, home and homeland to constructions of femininity. A substantial amount of research has focused on the feminisation of home and of domesticity, the role of women in imaginaries of the homeland and the (national) family as well as on women's attitudes towards homes and houses (see for example Pateman 1989; Madigan, Munro and Smith 1990; Massey 1992; Darke 1994; McClintock 1995; Bowlby, Gregory and McKie 1997; Morley 2000: 56-85; Boehmer 2005; Blunt and Dowling 2006: passim). However, home and its use as a metaphorical framework for multiple forms of nationalism are equally tied to gender and family relations beyond the role and representation of women. It is this broader sense of home as control, government and power politics that the notion of domopolitics addresses.

Domopolitics and the Management of the Nation as Home

Ideas about home and family are not only a framework for enabling individuals to relate to abstract entities like a nation. The home can equally be a model for how a nation-state is managed and governments often evoke it to explain security measures and state control to a national public. In that sense, a rhetoric of home turns into a mode of how the state and its institutions relate to their citizens (instead of the other way round). The U.S. discourse around 'Homeland Security' and recent political strategies of the Home Office in the UK show that the patriarchal, white, middle-class family is turned into a model for sometimes very concrete political measures of controlling movement, access to welfare and social services or entrance into a country (see Lonergan 2018; see also Heinz 2019).

At the heart of such a domopolitics are two ideas associated with home. Firstly, home is presented as '*our* place, where we belong naturally, and where, by definition, others do not' (Walters 2004: 241). This naturalisation and exclusive essentialisation ties in with the nationalist imaginaries outlined above. In addition, however, Walters identifies a second meaning through which governmental practices are tied to the home:

> The Latin word *domus* means house or home. It is closely related to the verb *domo* which can be literally translated as 'to tame' or 'break in' (today we would say domesticate). However, it was also possible to use the word *domo* more metaphorically: to speak of the act of conquering or 'subduing men or communities'. (Walters 2004: 241, quote in quote *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary*)

These two sides of the Latin word *domus* contain the goals and strategies of a domopolitics of the nation-state. The warm aura of home and family is used to justify a defensive concept of the nation, enabling the state to increase security measures and enhance control over and access to individual spaces and people's personal information.

In the case of domopolitics, this is not a simple containment of the homeland in the sense of traditional border control. Rather, it is a tacit management of semi-permeable membranes that can allow people and influences in if they are useful and that can extend the borders of the nation to any place within or without the state where the interests of the homeland are affected (see Walters 2004: 255; Darling 2011: 263-66). In consequence, the British border might begin at a Czech airport where your visa is already checked by a British official (see Walters 2004: 253) or extend into a British hospital where your migration status will be checked to make sure that you can legally claim public health services (see Tyler 2010: 70; Lonergan 2018: 1). Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy state that this type of state control is a case of 'everyday bordering' that 'has become a major technology of control' in the Western world (2018: 228). In this logic, anything designed to protect the national home is a valid measure, and these measures might redraw the borders of the territory in need of protection as well as open up the privacy of individual homes within the nation. Instead of simply abolishing mobility and movement, domopolitics manages and enables mobility for some people while preventing it for others. This took the shape of concrete political programmes like New Labour's '*managed migration paradigm*' (Lonergan 2018: 6). Thus, domopolitics paradoxically presents the national home as naturally pre-existent, predicated upon an organic image of the patriarchal family home and of static dwelling, while at the same time bringing this home and its territory into being through its creation and managing of borders, of mobility and their control.

This idea of governmental control and the use of home as its justification is obviously connected to the patriarchal family and Western ideals of gender relations. However, Walters says surprisingly little about the gendered aspects of his concept and mostly concentrates on the creation and management of borders and boundaries in the securitisation of migration. This has been noted by other researchers in their use of Walters' concept: '[…] although ostensibly gender-neutral, domopolitics actually rely upon, and produce, a gendered construction of (neo)liberal citizenship and belonging' (Lonergan 2018: 3). Yet, again, these analyses of the gendering of domopolitics predominantly focus on women, specifically migrant women and the pregnant migrant in particular, as the locus of anxieties surrounding reproductive work and the nation (see Gedalof 2007; Tyler 2010; Luibhéid 2013; Lonergan 2018). This is extremely relevant and definitely tied to domopolitical uses of imaginaries of home in public discourse. Still, it is as relevant, I would claim, to look at family structures and relations as a whole to assess how individuals relate to their homelands and how the nation-state deals with both citizens and migrants of all genders and generations. It is such an analysis that I now want to embark on in my reading of Obioma's novel, which takes into account the role of home in the broader postcolonial and Nigerian context.

Home and Homeland in the Postcolonial Context

The postcolonial novel has put a strong focus on the fraught political link between home, family and homeland (see for example George 1996; Boehmer 2005; Strehle 2008; Walder 2010). This is at least partly due to an ambivalence that has been central to many anti-colonial struggles. Independence movements in regions as varied as India, Ireland or South Africa refuted colonial domination and the negative, often racialised stereotypes that colonialist cultural production had spread about the colonies and their peoples. However, the idea of nationalism itself and ideas about home and gender that were used to make sense of the nation-state were often incorporated into images and practices of post-independence states (see McClintock 1997: 105-08). Interestingly, it was the figure of the mother that many independence movements took up in their efforts to create a 'historical continuity' for the future nation-state (Boehmer 2005: 27), a need made even more salient because many postcolonial nations would bring together sometimes radically diverse peoples and communities. As with previous European discourses, such a maternalisation of postcolonial nations was thus used to imagine the nation as a family and create affective ties and loyalties for an otherwise abstract entity. In the Indian context, Rabindranath Tagore puts it thus: '[…] the geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up life for a map' (1921: 96).

This adaptation of European nationalism with its governmental forms and cultural imaginaries has led some commentators to regard post-independent nation-states as 'successor state[s]' in which colonial elites were replaced by local elites who institutionalised 'a denial of difference as a condition of inclusion' (Merriman is here talking about Ireland after independence, 2011: 24). In other contexts, the rise of nationalist movements in non-European parts of the world has been read as a 'borrowed event' (George 1996: 12) or as a 'derivative discourse' that uses but also changes the terms and goals of the European tradition (Chatterjee 1986, quoted in George 1996: 12-3). Boehmer is more positive about the liberating effects of postcolonial nationalism, arguing that rather than being derivative in a negative sense, the nation in the postcolonial context can equally be 'adaptive and affiliative', offering 'liberatory potential' also to women (2005: 4).

Bracketing the difficult question of the evaluation of such borrowings, I want to point out their interesting structural effects. As becomes apparent in the semantics of the organic, genetic framework used in such postcolonial discourses, ideas about belonging to the post-independence state are made tangible by referring to notions of the patriarchal family as a model for being at home as an individual and citizen. This image of the family not only includes the relation between husband and wife, but also between parents and children, and it relies on the notion of home as a space of control and rule. Having 'grown up' into adult agency and independence is thus a motif found in many anti-colonial movements, a motif that again paradoxically adapts colonialist images of the colonies as children in need of growth through Western education and patriarchal leadership (see McClintock 1997: 92-3).

This sense of having grown up into adult agency and leaving the safe arms of the imperial parent can be found in the rhetoric that was used for Nigeria's celebration of independence on 1 October 1960. Newly-independent Nigeria was hailed as 'a beacon of

hope for postcolonial Africa' and 'cast as a counterpart to the unstable Congo' (Heerten 2017: 25-6). This discourse presented Nigeria not as a rebellious child storming out of its parents' house but rather a good student leaving home in order to test the lessons learned (see Heerten 2017: 26-7). This notion of home, family and transgenerational consensus is mirrored in how Nigeria's first Federal Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, proclaimed the new nation in his independence speech. Balewa presented Nigeria as the place of 'our own homes' and gave the new state a feminine pronoun (see Balewa 1960: n.pag.). Politicians like Balewa cast themselves as the loyal and proud 'sons' of their mother country, but as equally attached to their previous 'mother' and now friend, Britain.

At the same time, independence was also presented with biological metaphors surrounding birth. The former governor of Plateau State, Chief Solomon Lar, recalled the evening before independence as 'awaiting the birth of an independent and emancipated new nation called Nigeria' (Ndujihe 2017: n.pag.). Nigeria was thus portrayed as feminine and as mother but equally as new-born child, eager student and new grown-up partner of its previous colonial mother country. These images of the independent state seem strangely incoherent or even mutually exclusive. Yet what they all share is their relation to family and home: no matter whether Nigeria is a mother or a son, a grown-up or a child, biological and genetic imaginaries are used to make sense of the new nation and its relations to neighbours and previous colonisers. Through these imaginaries, newly formed Nigeria becomes a home for its citizens and their families, but it also becomes governable in terms of the power structures within the home.

The National Family in Nigerian Writing

Nigerian writers were less eager to accept this filial narrative, specifically when it came to affirming the partnership with Britain. The first and second generation of Nigerian writers, born in the 'first five decades of the twentieth century when the colonial event was in full force' (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005: 14), investigated the effects of colonialism on indigenous cultures and aimed at a deconstruction of the colonial 'master narrative' (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005: 15). Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), published two years before official independence, is arguably one of the most famous texts in this tradition (see for example Quayson 1997: 142). Authors like Wole Soyinka or Achebe saw it as their mission to 'help [their] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement' (Achebe 1990: 44).

Nevertheless, even writers like Achebe proposed solutions for the crises of the independent nation along the lines of patriarchal power structures. In his pamphlet *The Trouble with Nigeria*, written 'as an injunction to Nigeria just before the 1983 election scandal that ended in military takeover' (Boehmer 2005: 56), Achebe states that Nigeria needs a strong and responsible elite to lead the way by positive example. He sees the source of the nation's malaise in a lawless and selfish ruling class which lacks discipline (see 56). Instead of proposing a change in power structures themselves, Achebe relies on a reinvigorated new ruling elite. As all previous leaders of post-independent Nigeria had been men, this can be read as an appeal to the nation's (male) elite to become true role models, to lead the

nation to salvation and, in effect, is a call for the emergence of a truly fatherly leader able to rule the state like a home.

Although first- and second-generation women writers like Buchi Emecheta or Flora Nwapa had already criticised such a paternalism of the nation-state (see Stratton 1994), more radical criticism of nationalism and essentialism has been voiced by the third generation of Nigerian writers, for example Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Segun Afolabi or Helon Habila. This generation, born after 1960, has openly tackled issues of the postcolonial nation and the frustrations and conflicts within the project of nation building, questioning 'erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies' (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005: 15). The third generation of Nigerian writers continues earlier thematic explorations of the role of tradition and culture, urbanisation, family conflicts, war, violence or injustice and oppressive government (see Balogun 1991: 9-25; Gordon 1995: 7-8), but the Nigeria they set their texts in is less a conflicted nation-state and more a 'cultural, transnational and hybridized space' (Eze 2005: 110). This may be due to the fact that many third-generation authors live in Europe or the USA, but it is also indicative of a larger movement away from more narrow interpretations of national affiliation, belonging and identity. Writers like Adichie or Habila return to historical issues like the Biafran War or military rule, but they do so in order to move away from imaginaries of genetic lineage and towards new, more hybrid forms of belonging and togetherness.

The Fishermen: Home, Brotherhood and the Re-Assessment of Belonging

Chigozie Obioma's novel *The Fishermen* shares this occupation with new forms of belonging while keeping an interest in Nigeria's postcolonial state of the nation and issues of political unrest and instability. Obioma was born in Akure in the southwest of Nigeria in 1986. While born later than most other third-generation writers from Nigeria, Obioma takes up the concerns of writers like Adichie, Habila or Atta, as outlined above. In my interpretation, I will show how *The Fishermen* maps home onto homeland, connecting Nigeria, its colonial history and its ethnically diverse present to the family structure and power relations in the Agwu family. I will also demonstrate that the failure of the 'strong men' within the family can be read as a criticism of domopolitics. Suspicious of strength and control, Obioma's novel calls into question easy equations of home and homeland through a de-naturalisation of family roles and hierarchies.

To begin, *The Fishermen* conjoins the story of the Agwu family, their family home and the homeland of Nigeria so closely that the novel as a whole can be read as an allegory of Nigeria's fate as a postcolonial nation. As will be demonstrated in more detail below, this mapping can be found on multiple levels: set during the time of military rule, the novel features a dictator-like father in the home; ethnic conflict within Nigeria is addressed through the domestic conflict between the Agwu brothers; and even the geography of the Nigerian landscape is mapped onto the home when the two largest rivers of the country take the form of blood and oil in the Agwu's kitchen, connecting the fate of the brothers to the fate of the postcolonial nation. Multiple historical events, as for example Nigeria's participation in the Olympic final of the men's football in 1996, are described as bringing fatal changes to 'the people of Akure, to all Nigerians, and to our family' (Obioma 2015:

135), intertwining the fate of the family, the local community and the nation. In an interview, Obioma has claimed that he expressly wrote the novel as 'a sort of allegory: the foreign powers coming in and telling us to be this way' (Habila 2015: 47). The novel thus reflects upon the effects of colonial boundaries that threw together previously diverse groups and cultures in one legal entity and it uses the Agwu family's home to reflect upon issues of social relations, power and control.

In the novel is retrospectively narrated by first-person narrator Benjamin Agwu, the family's fourth son, who remembers the catastrophic events of a time when he was nine years old. He and his three older brothers are at the centre of the story: Ikenna, who is fifteen at the time; Boja, who is fourteen; and Obembe, who is eleven. His younger siblings David and Nkem are still toddlers during the events narrated. Already in the very first chapter of the novel, it is established that his father's desire for a large family is legendary in the district (see Obioma 2015: 14). This desire is explained through biological metaphors that link home and homeland. Benjamin describes his father as an eagle whose eyrie is his three-bedroom bungalow, the home in which the family has lived their whole life. This metaphor unites the father and the home in an organic fashion: as every eagle has an eyrie, his father has his home. The way this home is managed is then depicted in terms of military dictatorship: it is 'ruled with a clenched fist' (31). Natural instincts, home-making practices and political practices of the nation are thus tightly knit together in one allegorical narrative.

In line with this narrative, the Agwu family home is ruled by Ben's father and controlled through the fear of his punishment. To use Walters' term, Mr Agwu has installed a strict domopolitical regime in his house that regulates codes of behaviour, decorum and daily routines (see Obioma 2015: 13). If a domopolitics aims at governing the state like a home, Mr Agwu's will to govern his home like a state shows his aspiration to turn his house into a tiny model version of the homeland whose chaos and violence he decries so often. While on the surface criticising the state of the postcolonial nation, Mr Agwu therefore does not reject the mapping of home and homeland itself. Rather, his criticism is that the concrete implementation of this valid and 'natural' model has failed in contemporary Nigeria due to irresponsible leaders and colonial legacies (see 34). His outlook is thus very similar to voices like Achebe's who called for a new, responsible elite rather than proposing a change in power structures or national imaginaries of home.

It is in the planning of his sons' future that Mr Agwu's will to order presents itself most clearly. He envisages the outcome of his domopolitics in terms of a highly gendered career path for his six children:

> He sketched a pattern for our future – a map of dreams. Ikenna was to be a doctor, although later, after Ikenna showed much fascination with planes at an early age, […] Father changed it to pilot. Boja was to be a lawyer, and Obembe the family's doctor. Although I had opted to be veterinarian, to work in a forest or to tend animals at a zoo, anything that involved animals, Father decided I would be a professor. David, our younger brother, who was barely three in the year Father moved to Yola, was to be an engineer. A career was not readily chosen for Nkem, our one-year-old sister. Father said there was no need to decide such things for women. (Obioma 2015: 31-2)

The careers chosen for his sons are clearly shaped by Western notions of 'good jobs' in terms of income and status, both of which will, effectively, result in high social recognition within the community. Thus, although not all his sons' envisaged professions are connected to obvious practical uses (see Ben's future position as a professor), all these careers are chosen for their usefulness in enhancing the status of the family in a society shaped by a sense of elites, status groups and hierarchies. Mr Agwu's ideal of the family is therefore not only about money but decidedly influenced by the middle-class values and neoliberal ideas about the productive citizen that are so central for domopolitics. In this sense, Ben's father is keen on permitting, even promoting certain kinds of mobility, first and foremost upward social mobility, while discouraging any form of mobility that veers away from the path he himself has taken as the head of a successful, middle-class household with a clearly defined, patriarchal family structure. This is exactly what a domopolitics is concerned with: 'allowing certain forms of mobility, flow and movement according to predefined categories of risk' (Darling 2011: 265). In his ruling of the home like a state, Mr Agwu both creates and manages the movement through the semi-permeable border between home and beyond, a management that even envisages a potential move of Ikenna and Boja to Canada.

Yet, the 'map of dreams' goes further. In the career choices for his sons, Mr Agwu assigns a specific form of subjectivity to them: 'Domopolitics denotes in part a governmental will to divide and classify, to assign and impose particular subject positions' (Darling 2011: 266). Ben's father assigns each son to a pre-defined category of productivity, sometimes explicitly ignoring individual wishes or talents. In effect, his idea of his family is that of the neoliberal nation-state: the family is seen as a space in which productive, governable citizens should be raised who will ensure that a productive national community can continue into the future. It is only logical, therefore, that no career is chosen for the family's only daughter: her role is biologically tied to reproductive work and her association with the future is not through her own education but through her prospective children. Spatial, social and individual mobility is thus desirable within the narrow model of the patriarchal, middle-class family but strongly discouraged if it transgresses the boundaries of this hierarchical, gendered system.

This patriarchal domopolitics also entails that Mr Agwu uncritically accepts the discourse of development, progress and growing up that has been so central to colonial imaginaries and stereotypes of the colonised. After he finds out that his sons have been fishing in the forbidden Omi-Ala river in his absence, he complains: 'I sweat and suffer to send you to school to receive *a Western education* as civilized men, but you chose instead to be fishermen' (Obioma 2015: 39, emphasis in the original). Later on, he threatens his sons with sending them to his home village 'to farm or tap palm wine' (41) if they do not stop their rebellion against his authority. In these outraged exclamations, education is equated with civilisation, and civilisation is in turn associated with Westernisation, while traditional occupations like farming or tapping palm wine are presented not only as worthless but as ultimate punishments. This punishment is tied to mobility: if his sons do not comply with his wishes, he will send them to the village, if they do comply, they will be sent to Canada. In the managing of his sons, their movement and their careers, Mr Agwu thus enacts family metaphors used to describe the relationship between coloniser and colonised: '[…]

evolutionary progress was represented as a series of anatomically distinct family types, organized into a linear procession, from the "childhood" of "primitive" races to the enlightened "adulthood" of European imperial nationalism' (McClintock 1997: 92). In his desire to lead his sons into enlightened adulthood and neoliberal productivity, Mr Agwu demonstrates that – in spite of his often-voiced criticism of British imperialism – his ideals of his family implicitly follow imperialist imperatives, values and a belief in a linear movement towards progress.

'Strong Men', Home and the Failing Nation

Mr Agwu's power and control over his home as a space of managed mobility, borders and enlightened progress prove to be fleeting, as he is soon absent due to a job relocation, that is, due to a type of spatial mobility that he cannot decline in the logic of professional upward social mobility. The failure of his domopolitics shows in the changing relations among family members, primarily in his sons' disobeying their mother and father's rules, but it also becomes apparent in how Ben and his brothers experience the house that was previously described as his father's eyrie and centre of power. The house seems to physically change, becoming mobile and fluid: 'In Father's absence, the perimeters of the house seemed to have magically widened as though invisible builders unclasped the walls, like they would a paper house, and expanded its size' (Obioma 2015: 107). In contrast to this magical widening of the house, the body of the father, the ruler or 'commander' of this home, shrinks: 'His mammoth frame that commandeered decorum and calm, gradually shrunk into the size of a pea. […] At the beginning of the third month, his long arm that often wielded the whip, the instrument of caution, snapped like a tired tree branch. Then we broke free' (13-4). Again, organic metaphors are used to describe how Ben makes sense of his and his brother's relation to his father and his absence, turning the father from a mammoth into a pea and his arm into a snapping branch. His father, the house and the fatherly rule over the house are initially described as one, only to be disconnected in an oppositional movement. While the house grows, the father shrinks, and freedom seems to supplant the strict subject positions laid out for his sons.

However, the four brothers cannot shake off ideas of hierarchical family relations. Even in their father's absence, they act out models of patriarchal family relations by giving Ikenna the role of the leader because he is the oldest. As his father explains to Ikenna, his brothers 'do whatever you do and go wherever you go' because he is the first-born (Obioma 2015: 45). Instead of establishing alternative relations between each other, the brothers resort to ideas of seniority and look for a new leading figure that effectively takes the place of the absent father. This role of the strong man leads Ikenna to mistrust his brothers after Abulu, a local madman, prophesies that Ikenna will die a horrible death and be killed by the hands of a fisherman (see 93). Although Abulu's prophecy is ambivalent and the final words are lost because a passing plane drowns his voice, Ikenna is transformed by this incident, withdrawing from his brothers in the belief that the fisherman of the prophecy can only be one of his brothers. The ambiguous words of the madman turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy because Ikenna can only think in terms of hierarchies and power structures. Just as he has usurped the place of his father in the magically widened

family home, he imagines that the second-oldest brother Boja, formerly his most intimate and inseparable companion, must be the one who will kill him to usurp his place. Abulu's prophecy is vague, but exactly because of its vagueness, it offers a chance to categorise, to create borders and to identify enemies. Thus, Ikenna applies his father's domopolitics and their 'logic of sorting and classification' (Darling 2011: 266), only to bring into being the threat that he attempted to manage and contain by isolating himself from his brothers. In the end, Boja indeed kills Ikenna and commits suicide afterwards by throwing himself into the well behind the house.

The falling apart of the Agwu family and the futility of both Mr Agwu's and Ikenna's desire to categorise and contain risks within the family home is embedded in the novel's use of Nigeria's colonial history and its postcolonial legacy. Ben's father complains about 'the monster the British had created by forming Nigeria as a whole' (Obioma 2015: 34), commenting on ethnic conflict and sectarian violence between the diverse populations of the independent nation-state. Like the four brothers who are part of one family, the different groups and populations of Nigeria seem to belong to one national family and, as outlined above, the independence of Nigeria was conventionally described with family metaphors of birth and genetic kinship. However, this sense of brotherhood is also a source of conflict and the outburst of extreme violence between Ikenna and Boja mirrors events like the Biafran War or more recent riots and violence between ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. When the tight bond of Ben and his brothers is shattered by the shocking murder and suicide of Ikenna and Boja, the scene of Ikenna's death is accordingly described using the geographical map of Nigeria, in the image already alluded to above:

> The floor was drenched in his [Ikenna's] blood: a living, moving blood that slowly journeyed under the refrigerator, and, uncannily – like the rivers Niger and Benue whose confluence at Lokoja birthed a broken and mucky nation – joined with the palm oil, forming an unearthly pool of bleached red […]. (Obioma 2015: 148-49)

Home and homeland are allegorically linked in this graphic description. Through the addition of the palm oil, though, this nexus of home and homeland is also described via images of food. In this combination of images from geography, history and nutrition, the novel questions the seemingly natural relationship between the nation, the home, the family and the nurturing practices that make up the family home. In the estrangement and violence following the prophecy, Ikenna and Boja not only destroy their own lives but also Mr Agwu's 'map of dreams' and, in consequence, paternal ideals of an ordered homeland with stable and productive subject positions. The ultimate and shocking destruction of the family's home is a challenge to the domopolitics of the household's 'strong men', first Mr Agwu himself, then Ikenna as the leader of his brothers, Boja as the murderer of his brother, and finally Obembe as the leader of Ben. What engenders the destruction of this home is exactly the will to order and to command that was installed to create and manage the home in the first place. The story therefore makes clear that specifically those male protagonists who see themselves in the role of leaders are bound to fail. The first-born son's Igbo name contains this failure of the strong man in a nutshell: Ikenna can be

translated as 'the father's strength' or 'father's power', and it is he who is the first to die and show the futility of his father's 'map of dreams'.

Parables and Alternative Stories of Belonging

In imagining the fate of 'strong men' like Ikenna and the consequences of their deeds for the whole Agwu family, *The Fishermen* establishes a tradition of homeland as genetic belonging, brotherhood and strong male leadership only to destroy it, and it uses the family home as the site where this destruction is acted out. Exactly because they wanted to rule the home like a state and exert absolute control over it, the male leaders destroy the map of dreams that staked out the family's future. It is therefore logical that as a whole the novel establishes an alternative sense of belonging that is not an immobilised or natural link or a naturalised metaphor. This alternative finds expression in the way family stories are *told*: belonging becomes a complex, multiple act of narration that takes on different meanings in every re-telling and it does not use one, but various, sometimes mutually exclusive metaphors.

In a central twist, Ben as the story's narrator takes the place of his mother, creating an alternative maternal line of memory that he upholds as a son who will have sons of his own (see Obioma 2015: 20). In an instructive passage, he explains: 'Mother spoke and thought in parables' (105). Parables like the story of the *udu* and the water leaking out of it that Ben's mother tells her sons (see 104-05) attempt to make complex relations and abstract processes or values graspable through 'tacit analogy, or parallel, with a general thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to his audience' (Abrams 1999: 7). Ben's mother uses parable in this way, bringing home to her sons that they are the water that has leaked out of her jar and that they should not keep secrets from her so she can keep them safe. On a first level, Ben's mother here seems to use parable in much the same way as his father. In his strict domopolitical rule over his family, Mr Agwu accepts the political parable of the home as a miniature model of the nation. Similarly, if less explicitly, Mrs Agwu seems to control her sons by using simple but compelling stories to explain and justify power relations within the family.

However, I would argue that Ben's adaptation of his mother's parables shows the potential of storytelling as a way towards acknowledging the multiple and often contradictory perspectives onto an alleged truth, effectively questioning whether a single truth ever existed. In a performative aesthetic twist, *The Fishermen* itself is told in parables, each chapter starting with a comparison of a person or a feeling with an animal or natural process. Boja is a fungus, Ikenna is a python and a sparrow, hatred is a leech or hope is a tadpole, for example. Each of these parables is then followed up by others, often contradictory ones that sometimes describe the same person: Ikenna as a python is strong, monstrous and hot-tempered (see Obioma 2015: 47), but after his death he turns into a sparrow, '[a] thing with wings, able to fly out of sight in the blink of an eye' (150). The combination of the two parables is an indication that Ben is struggling to make sense of his brother and his death through analogy and allegory but that both ultimately remain elusive. It is no coincidence, then, that a central chapter about Ikenna's estrangement from his brothers is entitled 'The Metamorphosis', stressing that change rather than stasis shapes

an individual's and a family's life (68-94). The stories that Ben tells about his family and his home are multiple attempts to know and belong to them. Still, all of these parables can only tell a tacit, potential truth about that moment in time, while none of them tells *the* truth about the Agwu's home or Nigeria as a homeland.

Conclusion

Obioma's narration questions easy mappings of home and homeland as well as essentialist concepts of gender and identity, and it criticises domopolitical notions of control and government that are founded on imaginaries of home as organic belonging. *The Fishermen* thereby rejects overly nostalgic notions of home and belonging along the lines of genetic ancestry or filial ties and exposes the pitfalls of the metaphor of nation as home. Instead of seeing the home as a positive space of safety, order and comfort in which national values are preserved and handed down to the next generation, home is a space of violence and death in which stability is not reassuring but rather a dangerous and constricting absence of movement and mobility. Nevertheless, the novel also acknowledges Ben's need to be part of a family and to tell stories about belonging somewhere. In the multiple, often contradictory parables that Ben tells about home and family, the postcolonial nation emerges as a network of overlapping and contesting stories that change with every re-telling. Home thus turns into a constant aspiration, only fleetingly realised in how we tell stories about it, not in our will to control and immobilise it.

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