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Ogochukwu B. Ossai
Texas Tech University

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Cover Page Footnote

I want to express my profound gratitude to two of my professors, Dr. Jonathan Haynes and Dr. Nasrine Chahine, for imparting me the knowledge and ideas I used in writing this essay. I would also like to thank my siblings for their encouragement and support

Identity in the 21st Century Nigerian Fiction: A Case Study of *Blackass* by Igoni A. Barrett

Ogochukwu B. Ossai

Identity is what makes or shapes an individual. It is the unique quality that makes a person different from others, and it is a combination of race, gender, culture, religion, and nationality, among others. Although seemingly fixed, identity can be modified with medical advancement, self-awareness, or self-acceptance is also deeply contextual. Nigerian author Igoni Barrett explores these changes and distinctions of identity in his novel, *Blackass* published in 2015, when he writes about race, racial perception through the lens of skin color, and gender norms in the setting of Lagos, Nigeria. Historically, skin color was a method employed by the colonizers to identify their own people from others who appeared to be alienated or considered to be inferior and different. The use of skin color as a racial or identity marker is explained in the book, *The Melanin Millennium: Skin Color as 21st Century International Discourse* edited by Ronald Hall to be “those who were colonized by the West were physiologically differentiated from the Europeans vis-à-vis a relatively darker skin color” (vi). In line with this, *Blackass* is a satirical novel that explores identity transformation in skin colors and gender forms. This change happens through the parallel exploration of race and gender portrayed through the lives of two characters, Furo and Igoni. While touching upon the concept of “queerness” and what it means to be white (Caucasian) in a major Black society, the author describes how people inhabiting such a society interact and react to the concepts of change or being different. This paper examines the allegorical narrative strategies and politics of identity—race and gender—using postcolonial and race studies frameworks. I engage the discourse of identity by analyzing the social and cultural phenomena that occur throughout the plot of *Blackass*.

Furo Wariboko, an unemployed Nigerian youth, wakes up one morning to find his body metamorphosed from Black to white. The sudden change pushes him to run away from home and his family. The plot seamlessly moves through the character’s adjustments to his new skin color, the new identity that comes with it, and his interaction with an environment where he once felt comfortable. *Blackass* is a fierce twenty-first century comical, satirical adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* in the energetic modern setting of Lagos. The story opens with a metaphorical situation that draws its readers to the question of race, the possibility of racial change, and the perception of having a certain skin color in a society. Using transformation as a channel to explore what it means to be Black in a Nigerian society versus what it means to be white or *oyibo* in the same society, identity in this literary text shares a distinct resemblance to Kafka’s story. Kafka’s novella is about a young man, George Samsa, who transforms one morning into a giant insect, while *Blackass*’ premise begins with the main character, Furo Wariboko, awakened to a racial transformation. This premise is woven throughout the narration:

Furo Wariboko awoke this morning to find that dreams can lose their way and turn up on the wrong side of sleep. He was lying nude in bed, and when he raised his head a fraction, he could see his alabaster belly and his pale legs beyond, covered with fuzz that glints bronze in the cold daylight pouring in through the window...He was white, full oyibo, no doubt about it—and, with his knees swinging, the flesh of his thighs jiggling, his mind following these bone-and-flesh motions for bewildered seconds before moving its attention to other details of his physiology, he began to comprehend the extent of his transformation. (3-4)

In this scene, Barrett introduces us to the character's transformation of his physical body. The questions posed by the author through this establishment of change from one skin color to another are the following: If gender can be changed over time through a person's gender expression or identity, or both, can this same process apply to skin color? What does it mean for society and the world to have people change their skin color from one to another? Is the discrimination against a particular race psychological or an authentic, shared external experience? Throughout the narrative, readers follow both the author and the characters as they attempt to respond to the questions of racial identity and perception, skin color, and queerness in Nigeria's largest city. Barrett shows the stark contrast between what it means to be Black and what it means to be white in an African society. Furthermore, he touches upon the favorable bias received from one race because of their presumed "superiority" (white) over the Indigenous race (Black). This contrast distinguishes *Blackass'* narrative from Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Blackass explores identity and its psychological effects. Janet Helms and Ralph Piper in their article titled "Implications of Racial Identity Theory for Vocational Psychology, categorize the psychological concept of race in three ways: nominally, culturally, and socio-politically. Barrett employs the cultural concept because the novel's narration shows the attitudes, customs, and cognitive styles that are assumed to distinguish persons who have been made to behave acceptably in one racial group rather than another (Helms and Piper 124). When Furo abandons his family, he thinks about the cultural effects and how that might disassociate him from the customs he is used to and the attitudes or cognitive responses of people who belong to the same group.

In addition, the author exploits the skin color norm and the attention a different skin color means in Lagos; skin color that does not assimilate, singles out such a person from their environment or society. Doing this, highlights the significance of being a racial minority, especially in a nation where its indigenous citizens are both physiologically and psychologically categorized as the minor group in the global system like the African nations. Furo's reaction to his sudden transformation and the psychological response that arises like a protective shield for himself, his family, and against the society he faces portrays this. To contain his plight, Furo isolates himself from his family and strives through the views people have of his identity:

It was impossible to accept, absurd even to think it, but there it was before his eyes, this skin color that others were born into, but he, Furo, had awoken. There was no time to eat, to bathe, to take chances. He had to leave now. There was no more denying what

he was experiencing at this moment: he, Furo, son of a mother who knew his voice, was now a white man. (6)

In some parts of the country, it is not unusual to see a white person walking the streets on a sunny day. Ikoyi, Victoria Island, and Lekki Peninsula. That is where oyibos—light-skinned people—live, work, play, and are buried. Areas of Lagos places such as Agege, Egbeda, Ikorodu: a good number of the inhabitants of these neighborhoods have never held a conversation with an oyibo. And so, an oyibo strolling down their street is an incidence of some thrill. (9)

The novel's narrative insinuates that Furo's family would not have accepted him for being different or for morphing into a human with a different identity. This fear is internalized by the character's parents and the eyes in the streets that follow him everywhere. There is nothing strange about white residents in Nigeria. It only becomes a rare phenomenon to encounter a white man begging on the streets. Lagos is made up of two parts—an Island and a Mainland. This links to the class strata in a capitalist country like Nigeria. The island has been tagged as the domain for foreigners, the wealthy, and returnees from abroad. On the other hand, the mainland is for the masses—the middle or working-class to the lower class. Furo falls into the latter category. The author places the character in an environment that shows the effect skin color has in this type of city. Additionally, the author enters the social context of transgender living or queerness in Lagos. Queerness is portrayed in the scene where the two main characters, Furo and Igoni have sexual intercourse for the first time. During this intimate moment, Igoni feels a bit resistant towards Furo's physically touching her body because she is still in the process of transitioning from male to female and her penis is still very much present. "I wasn't ready to let him go all the way, though he tried until sleep came ... and when he awoke, after he called me back to bed and slipped his hand between my legs, he, too, found my secret ... It is easier to be than to become. Frank should have known that" (261).

Another way to engage with the novel is implicit bias. This type of bias occurs unconsciously, usually without discriminatory intent. The exploration of race in *Blackass* is based on outlook. It is about what race represents within a particular society or city. According to *The Women's Place* article published in The Ohio State University's website, implicit bias is also known as implicit social cognition. Implicit social cognition covers favorable and unfavorable evaluations, which are activated unknowingly and without an individual's awareness. These biases deep in the subconscious are different from known biases that individuals may choose to hide for social and political accuracy. One example of this is Furo's interview for the sales manager position at a fictional company. The interview takes a twist when he is hired as the managing executive by the company because of his white skin color in a predominantly black society.

Being white in places like Nigeria calls into question white privilege and whether it exists. Helon Habila, author of *Oil on Water* compares the fictional reaction of society members to James Baldwin's reference to the white man as an object of money in his essay "Stranger in the Village." Beyond white privilege, a white person's presence is romanticized in sectors like the country's economy. Prior to the executive order signed by President Buhari in 2018 that prohibits the minister of interior from granting visas to foreign workers whose skills are readily available in Nigeria, the Nigerian government used to preferably assign national contracts such

as the construction of roads to foreign companies and import workforce from other countries like the United States and Germany, among others (Kazeem). The reason for the executive order was to eliminate the dominance of foreign or white privilege in the workforce and economic system of the country. Assigning national contracts to people from the European and North American continent was deemed to disregard skilled Nigerian workers, its national culture, and their contribution to the national development.

According to Barrett in his fictional work, the white race receives superior regard and favoritism from the people of Lagos. He displays this superiority in the lives of Furo's relationship and interaction with other characters like Syreeta, her friends, and the wealthy man who gives Furo a one-of-a-kind opportunity purely because he believes his skin color would be advantageous. This new skin color also grants him favor in the sight of Syreeta, who takes him to her home, shelters him, befriends him, and gets impregnated by him. The author expresses his worldview on race and Nigerian society through this character. Using satire, he claims that human society emphasizes the importance of having a certain skin color or being a foreigner or another race; it leads to imbalanced privileges among members of the society. The second part of the narration is about Igoni, a character named after the author himself. The novel's dynamic changes at this turn, where gender is at the forefront. From the perspective of the Nigerian society, which is historically known for its strict spiritual practices, gender fluidity has often been explored as a spiritual phenomenon rather than a physical one.

Gender identity and expression are psychological, social, and cultural desires to identify with a different gender (or none). Gender transformation or transgenderism is a prominent subject matter discussed in a hushed tone, and the process is a subject matter the general people often engage with or experience in isolation, especially in Nigeria. Although the country is evolving, changing, and opening its arms to more social and cultural changes occurring worldwide with time, it is still harsh towards this kind of change and its implications. In the Igbo culture, males are treasured more than females, and although times have changed, some families still hold on to the belief that the boy child has a more profitable future than the girl child. This superiority complex is emphasized in Igbo tradition, creating challenges for discovering and learning about one's identity and expression in a social and cultural context. Barrett discusses this through the life of the fictional transgender character, known as Igoni. Igoni transitions from male to female because he was abandoned by his father and antagonized as a failure by his family members. "Manhood and its machismo are attributed to the seed, which then follows that the failure to make a man is the egg's burden" (Barrett 163). The dereliction of his mother to produce a successful son instead of a writer (an occupation or profession often associated with the female gender) is the motivating factor for gender change in the novel.

Gender identity develops within psychological, social, and cultural contexts. It also takes place within multiple environments: a person's family, their larger community, and the society that they live in (Katz-Wise, 2). Emezi calls attention to the development of gender from a spiritual perspective and provides insight into the psychological experiences of these people. Gay sex is another theme that *Blackass* addresses. Although Barrett does not broadly focus on it throughout the text, it is a pivotal point in the declaration of Igoni's identity transformation from male to female. At the very end of *Blackass*, when Furo, who abandons pregnant Syreeta, and Igoni meet again, they get intimate with each other. Regardless of her gender

transformation and sexual orientation, the narrator of the section is willing to have sex with Furo. Igoni talks about herself as one without shame. Furo as the “hero” of a story that had set me free” is not afraid of being romantically intertwined with Furo, but she is unwilling to let his hands go beyond her skirt because her manhood is still intact. The next morning, Furo discovers the secret she is hiding once he slides his hands between her pants.

In the novel, Syreeta and her friends mention how politicians in high government places are most likely responsible for the prohibition of lesbianism, gay, bisexuality, transgender, and queer community law, despite their being part of this minor group. To support this, Sheree Schwartz discusses a bill that was signed into law in 2014 by the Nigerian government to stop same-sex marriage, making life difficult for the LGBTQ community. The bill prohibits living together between same-sex sexual partners and bans any public display of affection. The Nigerian environment thus increases the possibilities of prejudice against gay and bisexual individuals. The individuals who fall within this category are susceptible to violent attacks. More so, because they are aware and are expectant of how society will treat them, these people go to great lengths to hide their sexual orientation despite the changing times (Schwartz et al. 3). Referring subtly to male politicians, one of Syreeta’s friends says:

Their chatter was wide-ranging: from an ex-head of state who fixated on the feet of soldiers’ widows to overheard gossip of Abuja politicians who had a thing for orgies with boys. (138)

The pressure and discrimination that often accompanies racial and gender identity might intensify any negative mental health consequences victims such as Furo Wariboko and Igoni suffer. In *Blackass*, trauma stems from a social construct created by Lagos society’s perception of race and gender transformation. It is one thing to be born “Black” or “white,” but it is another thing for individuals to change their skin color from black to white and vice versa. Although change can be said to be constant, it is still subject to certain variables, such as self, groups, family, and environment. Barrett talks about how the character struggles to cope with the physical transformation of his identity, even though this battle happens momentarily. Igoni Barrett also offers the readers an insight into the mental fright of Igoni after her gender change from a man to a woman.

Blackass presents a contrasting version of imposter syndrome. Furo shows his traumas by changing his name to “Frank Whyte.” The first time Furo recognizes his racial transformation, he runs away from home. Upon seeing foreigners who wear the same skin color as himself, Furo becomes paranoid that people might find out who he is and that he does not fit into the category of white people seated in a coffee shop until Syreeta approaches him. Another instance is when Furo accompanies his supposed savior Syreeta to visit her group of friends whose husbands are foreigners. He briefly feels awkward because he thinks he is below the standard of what the women expect from a white man. These two examples showcase Furo’s persistent perception of competency despite contrary evidence at the initial stage of his transformation. He always depends on an individual or favorable situation to boost his confidence:

That morning, when she and he discovered his buttocks together, he was branded on to the underside of his consciousness. He had awoken several times in a fright on

Wednesday night, her laughter ringing in his mind. But the immense terror was that the blackness on his buttocks would spread into sight, would creep outwards to engulf everything, to show him up as an impostor. That it hadn't yet happened didn't mean it wouldn't still. That he didn't have a hand in what he was didn't mean he wasn't culpable. No one asks to be born, to be black or white or any color in between, and yet the identity a person is born into becomes the hardest to explain to the world. (111)

Transgender people can suppress negative attitudes and direct them towards themselves. This is often referred to as internalized stigma. These traumatic factors increase the chances of mental health problems and low life satisfaction among other members of the society. When Igoni becomes the narrator and describes her experience at the movie theater with Tekena, she talks about how Furo's sister defends her from whom she had been—the male gender- after being catcalled. At the end of the book, she also talks about how she feels like an impostor because of her confrontation with Furo about her penis. In "Transgender Social Inclusion and Equality: A Pivotal Path to Development," the scholars write,

Their families often reject trans people who express their gender identity from an early age. If not cast out from their homes, they are shunned within households resulting in lack of opportunities for education and with no attempts to ensure attention to their mental and physical health needs. Those who express their gender identities later in life often face rejection by mainstream society and social service institutions, as they go about undoing gender socialization. (Divan Vivek et al. 3)

Igoni mentions the consequences of changing from one gender to another in the family. When she finds a similar nature of exclusion in Furo, she confesses that her decision to transition has brought about insults, neglect, and disrespect to her mom. She also references how the abandonment of her and her mother by her father has affected her. The reason why she has decided in the first place to change from the male to female gender is because people from her family and similar ethnicity made fun of her inability to perform and be of advantage the way a male child is supposed to. During sexual intercourse with Furo, she tries to hide the part of her that is yet to transform into the female gender out of fear of being insulted, shunned, and rejected. The process of gender identity and expression change is still unfamiliar to her; it is something she is still learning to embrace.

Critics like Emily Zhao have raised concerns over the novel's plot structure, asserting an erratic and disjointed flow of events throughout the story, as each chapter begins with another ideology, new characters, or events. Despite a lack of organization in structure, it is very fast-paced and reflective of the various changes, including the chaotic dynamics that go together. The pacing is agreeably relaxed and shortened upon the first read. The voice becomes direct and exact. Zhao describes the structuring of the novel as one that digresses from a serious tone to a lighthearted one, which shows the ability of Barrett to satirize people, and the meeting of two worlds. However, the change would have been a substantial effect in the novel if it was done throughout and not sparsely. In her analysis of the novel, Zhao writes, "Race is obviously inescapable given the novel's premise, and there is always the implicit potential for race-related commentary to go awry when the author is of one race" (3). This statement results from Barrett

being only Black; his identity causes him to either write from a single perspective or to disregard the reaction of the other race. The various shifts that occur in this book, and how it tries to explore several societal and cultural issues, strains the focus and effectiveness of the novel on the prominent issues affecting a large part of the world. Nigerian culture is evolving, and these cultures are open to learning and accepting certain popular culture that is not within their beliefs. In recent years, transgender people and the queer community are gaining their voices and fighting for their rights in Nigerian society. Even though the culture of gender change is still unpopular, this community is at the brink of breaking the ancestral norms that have affected the country's politics.

Other critics weigh in on the language and the use of humor to tell the stories of Igoni and Barrett. They disagree on the effect of humor in the narration. There is dry humor to *Blackass* that exposes the injustices and frustrations of Nigerian society, evoking the double economy for its citizens, perception of foreigners (especially the white race), nonsensical bureaucracy, vernacular, and the native fondness for laughter and arguments. At the same time, Barrett's satire works to the disadvantage of the storytelling because it lacks clarity. It is difficult to determine whether the author aims to ridicule the perception of race and gender, or the customs, attitudes, and responses of people to these types of identity changes. Regardless, Barrett accomplishes maintaining "the act between social narration and engaging plot critique through the flexibility of his language." The language used is engaging and constructive, rhythmically moving the reader along from page to page, scene to scene. Barrett's unique, commanding voice offers an easy entrance to the bubbling psyche of his protagonist and the bustling streets of his city (Gilmartin 2).

Blackass, despite its flaws, is a daring novel that immerses the reader into a world of racial and gender equality. It lends itself to the voices that traditional, religious, and cultural beliefs have subdued. The narration and the characters symbolize the freedom and the lives that these minority groups have to assume in order to fit into the customs and attitudes of others from a different group in a society. Home or abroad, there are still restrictions that bound the freedom of these underrepresented groups. But with literary fiction, they have several voices representing who they are.

Exemplary in *Blackass*, literary fiction is a way through which writers can speak up for or against issues of public interest. It can be achieved in forms like criticism and in teaching literature. Some issues that are discussed or explored through fiction are transgenderism, queerness, and gender disparity in ethnic groups. The list of topics extends to religious differences and tribalism. Writers who involve themselves in this discourse are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Akwaeke Emezi, Igoni A. Barrett, and Ayobami Adebayo, among others.

Freedom is expression for Black and Indigenous writers and other people of color. This expression is often achieved through art and literature. These underrepresented groups of people fought for their freedom by using their access to westernized knowledge to communicate and place themselves in political discourses effectively. During the postcolonial era, they also worked to promote their national culture through words and literary publications. Even while experiencing political turmoil and threats, they were relentless in pursuing and telling stories that were of public interest through literary fiction, essays, and poetry, in various literary publications and organizations. Through magazines like *Lotus* and others, writers in the African and Asian continents could create and produce content that resist

the reactionary and racist movements that undermine human culture (Afro-Asian Writings 142). A literary fiction like *Blackass* strives to address the implications of racial difference within psychological, social, and cultural contexts. It is also within these contexts that BIPOC writers continue to fight for their freedom and place within the global sphere.

Being a Nigerian himself, Igoni Barrett enters the discourse of race and gender from his own experience with these two social and cultural phenomena through his fictional work. One of the ways he achieves this is through two points of view and the division of the book into two sections. This way, readers can understand and engage with the characters' racial and gender experiences. The political responses that certain types of writing attracted in many places within Africa during the postcolonial era were ones that did not ensure the safety of the writer and resulted in restrictions like Wole Soyinka's imprisonment during the civil war. In modern times, however, these writers have the freedom to dabble into politics and to express their views on certain political cultural issues. The parts of transgender and queer community that have been subdued or silenced by the Nigerian government are rising and becoming more vocal through literary fiction, fashion, and other forms of art.

The rise and circulation of short stories, novels, and poems, have provided a gateway to freedom, identity, and expression for those shunned, discriminated against, or deprived of their human rights. Nevertheless, there are still certain laws like the bill passed in Nigeria and anti-vigilantes that seek to silence the people and the work that represents them. Like the evolution and growth of writing and the writing community, interpretation of these types of writings has grown beyond the postcolonial era to a free era, ethnic studies, and Black studies. More specifically in the teaching of literature, some theories are improved, tweaked, and developed to accommodate some of the Indigenous themes conveyed in stories. Students of these teachings, readers, and scholars of this type of literature that discusses and addresses underrepresented topics have more resources, theories, and language to help them understand the texts. The writing style employed by Black Indigenous writers and people of color is one from personal experience, often expressed through fictional characters.

Race and gender identity are matters of relevance that people need to address through continuous discourse. Fictional texts like *Blackass* are essential to communities that belong to the minority group, especially in a country like Nigeria, where being transgender is still unacceptable. Beyond race and gender, ethnic differences and tribalism are also issues that need to be portrayed and incorporated into literary fiction. These issues that have been silenced throughout several generations are taking shape and form in the works of Black, Indigenous, and people of color writers in the diaspora. Barrett's satirical work, *Blackass*, champions the conversation of what race and gender mean in a country like Nigeria. It also serves as a voice for this silenced group of people finding their place and identity in a society that is prejudiced against their kind, not for any other reason than being themselves and feeling comfortable in their bodies.

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