

Abjuring the Postcolonial Identity: Gender and Masculinity in Chris Abani's *Graceland*

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Abstract

This article surveys the concepts of gender and masculinity in Graceland. Set in postcolonial state, Chris Abani's fictional work addresses the question of gender and the predicament of masculinity in relation to the role of the nation-state, the local culture, and the influence of Western epistemologies. While portraying colonialism's continuing legacy, Graceland moves beyond the past to confront a present characterised by an increasingly globalised world which underrates the role of the nation and blurs border lines. As a postcolonial nation-state, Nigeria's colonial history and its aftermath are crucial to the identity formation and "subjecthood" which the fictional communicates. This paper aims to highlight the approaches set forth in Graceland regarding identity, gender norms and race. The analysis of the postcolonial subject focuses on the novel's standpoints on gender binary concepts surrounding postcolonial literature.

Key words: gender binary; identity; masculinity; postcolonial; race; state-nation

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1. Introduction

Graceland (2004) is a cultural novel written by Chris Abani, a Nigeria American writer. He has authored *Masters of the Board* (1985), *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014) known for addressing political and cultural issues. Abani's second fiction, *Graceland*, originates in a politically charged coming of age story. It questions the existence of a space where the fluidity of identity and a "life with meaning" are possible in postcolonial Nigeria. The novel exposes the gradual erosion of native traditions and the encroachment of Western epistemologies. The postcolonial subject, nevertheless, remains the channel where forces converge and are manifested in a contested identity which resists colonialism anchoring.

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In this paper, I will examine the opposition of forces as they unfold precisely in the realm of postcolonial identity that is based on cultural interactions between different identities which are assigned varying to degrees of social power by the colonial society. This realm emerges not simply as one of the many forces acting on the subject, but also part of subjectivity itself which is inevitably gendered and racialised.

My discussion shows how gender and race are employed to serve strategies of control and therefore are intricately linked to questions of warding off threats and defending Igbo masculinity and power. On the other hand, the paper exposes the possibility of finding an alternative space on account of destructive masculinity and perversion of authority.

2. Gender and Race as Strategies of Control

In a crucial scene which captures the complexity of the relationship between gender and race, Elvis wears makeup and admires himself in front of the mirror. In this scene, the intertwined and complex relationship between gender, sexuality and race is exposed by the act of drag, thereby suggesting the socially constructed nature of what all of the above concepts entail. After having worn eye shadow, eyeliner, mascara and red lipstick with an added shine of petroleum jelly, Elvis thought that “this was the closest he had come so far to looking like the real Elvis, and he wished he had a camera.” As he contemplates himself, Elvis wonders “What if he had been born white, or even just American? Would his life be any different? Stupid, he thought. If Redemption knew about this, he would say Elvis was suffering from colonial mentality” (*Graceland* 78). Elvis’ desire to look like the real Elvis goes beyond typical fandom. What is most obvious about this desire is a wish to look ‘white’. ‘Whiteness’ does not only connote skin colour, just as Elvis Presley does not only epitomise stardom. In *Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (1996), Gilbert Rodman contends that Elvis Presley represents certain values to his audience beyond those associated with stardom. The most dominant representation is Elvis’ embodiment of the American Dream, Rodman notes. Elvis’ success proves that America is indeed the land of opportunities and that everyone has a chance of succeeding, even a boy raised in poverty in Mississippi. Moreover, one of Elvis’ greatest virtues in the eyes of his fans was his determination “to remain a good ‘oil’ country boy at heart,” despite his acquired wealth (G. Rodman, 1996: 73). This attitude, combined with

financial success, make Elvis an idol anyone can identify with and look up to at the same time. But how does this apply to a poor black boy in Nigeria? The question of being white or 'even just American' explicitly links race to nationality and places the former in a politically and culturally charged context. White means to be privileged and have a better life. Race does not simply indicate a skin colour or particular physical traits, but a status which locates one's position in the world. In this sense, race becomes a measure of comparison.

As a postcolonial writer, Chris Abani asks the reader to think about the effects that imperialism had on people of colonised countries. At a macro-level, colonialism brought a different view to the world system; colonised people were dehumanised and treated like savages. Moreover, a new binary mentality started to diffuse among people; the colonised was seen as "Other", contraposed to the coloniser, the value carrier, who became the "Us" subject. The colonised lost his/her identity; in order to bring "humanity" and supposedly better values, the colonising nation tried to change the faith, language and way of living substituting its own culture to it. The colonised subject did not know where he/she belonged anymore; he/she could feel belonging both to his/her mother country and to the imperial state at the same time.

I argue that Abani's literary creation deals with the search of identity or with finding the roots of one's culture; it presents the effects western civilisation has caused to both the nation that has been under colonial domination and to the people. In so far as the western society influences Elvis, he must face the consequences of colonisation, human traffic, wars, conditions of poorness and other negative changes that colonialism has caused. Colonial domination had disastrous effects both on the lands it claimed and on the people who inhabited the colonies. The question of being white in a 'black world', or 'even just American' explicitly links race to nationality and places the former in a politically and culturally charged context. White means to be privileged and have a better life. Race does not simply indicate a skin colour or particular physical traits, but a status which locates one's position in the world. In this sense, race becomes a measure of comparison.

The scholar Franz Fanon was strongly interested in the consequences that this process had on people's psychology. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon addresses this approach as he expresses his concern for the way in which the black man evaluates himself against

others. Fanon explored the experiences of black people in a “white” world. After colonisation, black people started to feel as if they belonged to two worlds: theirs and the Empire’s. Black people were educated in western schools, they were thought the western religion, culture and habits. They were educated as whites, but when they moved to the motherland, they would find that the reality was very different. Imperial countries did not accept them as whites, and this racism created psychological problems in the black man. The sharp divide between ‘white’ and ‘black’ and their respective significations is the outcome of a primarily economic process, Fanon contends, which subsequently leads to the internalisation of racial concepts of superiority and inferiority. This process cannot be detached from its gendered context, for what is at stake is the meaning of ‘man’ and what he stands for. Relating masculinity to financial success and power reiterates the dominant definition of western masculinity, associated primarily with a white middle-class heterosexual male, and excluding all the others. As such, ideal masculinity becomes associated with one specific category of male, an idea Fanon painfully expresses as “For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (F. Fanon, 1967: 10). In addition to the controversial relation of success/power/masculinity, the above definition ignores the fact that a majority of males do not even have access to resources which make this definition possible.

Besides, Richard Majors states that “[m]any black males have accepted the ... norms of dominant social definitions of masculinity (being the breadwinner, having strength, and dominating women) ... In other words, the dominant goals of hegemonic masculinity have been sold to black males,” however, “access to the legitimate means to achieve those goals has been largely denied black males” (R. Majors, 2001: 210-211). The achievement of masculinity through successful ascension to power results in a systemic exclusion of the non-white male from the circles of power perpetually defining dominant masculinity, and inversely from the dominant definition which assumes the possibility of power. Read against postcolonial history, this exclusion reiterates imperialist discourse and shows a western domination over gender understandings, whereby the white male is perceived to manifest the ‘normal’ masculinity, and men of colour to manifest a ‘deviant’ one which needs to be disciplined and subjugated. Black bodies were thought of having an “excessive masculinity”, Asian bodies an “insufficient masculinity” (J. Halberstam, 1998: 2), whereas Arabs a perverted one which embraced homosexuality.

Judith Halberstam contends that “these stereotypical constructions of variable masculinity mark the process by which masculinity becomes dominant in the sphere of white middle-class maleness” (J. Halberstam, 1998: 2). The dominant definition of masculinity is constructed in contrast to what is considered insufficient, excessive, or deviant masculinities.

The above passage which connects gender and race shows how definitions of humanity have been based on the perceived relationship between both and critiques the rigidity that such a relationship assumes. Using makeup – a major component of drag – as a tool to momentarily “whiten” his skin, Elvis creates an interstitial space that transgresses both racial and gender binaries. This is made clear as Elvis compares himself to transvestites:

Admiring himself from many angles, he thought it was a shame he couldn't wear makeup in public. That's not true, he mentally corrected himself. He could, like the transvestites that haunted the car parks of hotels favored by rich locals and visiting whites. But like them, he would be a target of some insult, or worse, physical beatings, many of which were meted out by the police, who then took turns with their victims in the back of their vans (Graceland 77).

Elvis' attempt to become white will be read as transvestism to the outside world, thereby exposing the interconnectedness of race and gender binaries, and emphasising the queerness of transgression. This binary exploiting relationship has created a discourse that has become taken for granted, both in postcolonial and in patriarchal systems. Although Elvis does not necessarily consider himself a transvestite, comparing himself to them expresses a common ground. In the eyes of society, whoever deviates from established gender binaries will be regarded as a transgressor who must be punished. In addition to the social harassment Elvis might face, the transvestite might be 'legally' punished by the state through physical and sexual abuse which implies that “gender is forcibly, literally, policed” (A. Aycock, 2009: 16). Elvis' transvestism may or may not be linked to a troubled sexual identity or correspond to a transgender tendency. As his sexuality remains ambiguous, Elvis' act of drag emerges as a statement on its own and suggests what Marjorie Garber calls “unmarked transvestism,” transvestism as an unconscious pattern,” as a language that can be read, and double-read, like a dream, a fantasy, or a slip of the tongue” (M. Garber, 1997: 354). Transvestism in this sense is characterised by a compulsion to repeat, and is closely linked to impersonation which seeks to

replicate an original. In his attempt to impersonate the real Elvis and look white, the protagonist also imitates gender by replicating its signs and bodily practices, thereby creating a space where racial and gendered manifestations intersect. Race and gender emerge as performative constructions produced by corporeal signs characterised by repetition or replication.

Elvis wears makeup in the privacy of his room and does not risk going out in public looking as he does. His feminine appearance and his attempt to look white suggest gender and racial ambiguity, and both are a threat to native culture. The first threatens heteronormative masculinity on which traditional communities are based, and the second questions the role of race as a determinant of social belonging. Defending native customs and preserving gender norms thus go hand in hand. Two scenes in the novel exhibit this pattern perfectly while simultaneously questioning its success.

3. Warding off Threats and Defending Igbo Masculinity

In the scene of Elvis' "first step into manhood" (*Graceland* 19), five-year-old Elvis is asked to participate in a ritual that requires him to kill an eagle amidst the encouragement and celebration of the family. However, Elvis' experience was not very traditional as he was handed an already injured animal which turned out to be a chicken.

There was a line of blood from its beak that ran into the yellow down around its neck. The blood was beginning to harden and stiffen the feathers into a red necktie.

"It is alive," Elvis said.

"Of course it is. You just shot it," Joseph replied.

"I didn't."

"You did," Sunday said.

"Is this an eagle chick?" Elvis asked.

Joseph laughed. "Elvis, you funny. No, it is chicken, eagle is too expensive" (Graceland 19).

The substitution of the eagle by a chicken happens for financial reasons as Elvis' uncle, Joseph, remarks. Thus, an element of the ritual is being altered by the changing of economic situation. The substitution is only a small example of how capitalism's dominion can reach and affect even the miniscule details of traditional life, forcing its amendment.

Another alteration is the changing attitude towards the authenticity of the connection between violence and killing on the one hand, and the concept of manhood on the other. What I mean by 'authenticity' is the inevitability and necessity of such a connection, and not its existence as such. Ideally, the ritual described in *Graceland* perceives violence and aggression as central to the construction of Igbo male identity: "It is de first step into manhood for you. When you are older, de next step is to kill a goat, and den from dere we begin your manhood rites. But dis is de first step" (*Graceland* 19). Thus, killing is considered a *condition* for manhood. However, although it lies at the heart of the ritual, its execution is flawed and undermined as Elvis does not actually kill the chicken but is asked to pretend that he did. The pretension exposes the tenuous link between the behaviours of the male subject and what is considered to be essential characteristics of male identity, thereby questioning traditional views in light of a culturally changing society. For "while it is evident that certain behaviors have come to characterize males – sexual and physical assertiveness, competitiveness, aggression," it cannot be said that masculinity necessarily entails them, let alone that masculinity is based upon them (S.M. Whitehead, K.J. Barret, 2001: 19). The pretension also shows the performative nature of the ritual. The meaning of the ritual is extracted from what the ritual stages not from what actually happens. It persists through its symbolic meaning which nonetheless serves the preservation of gender binaries by assigning certain traits exclusively to the male subject. Even if symbolically, completing this ritual represents the first step towards a respectable Igbo masculinity. The ritual acquires a higher value when faced with the changing economic and cultural conditions because while globalisation threatens local customs, it also invokes stronger resistance. Holding on to what constitutes the local culture becomes a challenging task which requires an amplified sense of ethnic belonging in which affirmative gender models play a crucial role. The ritual is not only an assertion of masculinity, but an affirmation of Igbo male identity. Failing to demonstrate the required aggression and violence would thus mean a failure of masculinity and a disgrace to the community and culture. It would mean a disruption of the gender structure on which the community is built and which the culture celebrates. Elvis causes this disruption and pays the price for it when he dresses up in women's clothes and has his hair plaited by his aunt Felicia at the age of nine. The scene starts on a

cheerful note as Elvis enjoys the cross dressing game amidst the laughs and giggles of his aunt and her friends.

Elvis longed to try on their makeup and have his hair plaited. Aunt Felicia finally gave into his badgering and wove his hair into lovely cornrows. One of the other girls put lipstick on him. Giggling, and getting into the game, another pulled a mini-dress over his head. On Elvis, it fell nearly to the floor, like an evening gown. He stepped into a pair of Aunt Felicia's too-big platforms and pranced about, happy, proud, chest stuck out (Graceland 61).

The above passage shows Elvis as genuinely enjoying cross dressing. He insists on experiencing it, and when he does he feels 'happy' and 'proud' to take part in an activity that makes him a centre of attention. However, being young and innocent, he is not aware of the reverberations of his actions when it comes to social norms and expectations. When he sees his father and runs innocently to meet him and show him his outfit and hairdo, he is shockingly confronted by rage and physical violence:

Elvis ran straight into the first blow, which nearly took his head clean off. As he fell, his father grabbed him with one hand, steadying him, while with the other he beat him around the head, face, buttocks, everywhere. Too shocked to react, still out of breath from his sprint, Elvis gulped for air as his father choked him (Graceland 61).

Sunday's reaction conveys that Elvis' act is a behaviour that cannot be tolerated and that needs to be severely punished. There is no room for words or communication, only violence which is used as an expression of disapproval and as a means of silencing any possible objections that Elvis might have. The only explanation that Sunday offers is "No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual!" (Graceland 62). He later shaves Elvis' head while saying "I'm only doing dis for your own good. It's not easy to be a man. Dese are trying times. Not easy" (Graceland 63). Thus there is a sharp contrast expressed between 'homosexual' and 'man'. The two cannot coexist and one necessarily means the negation of the other. Being a man is understood as being a heterosexual masculine man, and demonstrating otherwise is understood as opposing to the very concept of man. David Gutterman's reflexion on 'Postmodernism and the Interrogation of Masculinity' in *The Masculinities Reader*, reveals that "masculinity or the male identity is achieved by the constant process of warding off threats to it. It is precariously achieved by the rejection of femininity and homosexuality" (S.M. Whitehead and K.J. Barrett, 2001: 61). In the light of

the above quote, Elvis' behaviour is enraging to Sunday not only because of the latter's fear of having a homosexual son, but also because it offends and threatens masculinity in general and consequently Sunday's. And if 'homosexual' is thought to be produced simply by cross dressing and adopting the fashion thought to belong to the other sex, then masculinity is hanging by a thread and needs to be aggressively defended. However, what is interesting about the end of this incident is that Sunday 'restores' Elvis' masculinity simply by shaving his head. Gender is produced by and reduced to a change in physical appearance, highlighting the idea that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (J. Butler, 2006: 33). Instead of staging masculinity, Elvis stages femininity this time, thereby disrupting his 'manhood rites' and rendering them absurd. Sunday's fervent reaction to Elvis' drag act shows the high significance assigned to dress and appearance in established concepts of gender binaries. The term "gender binary" describes the system in which a society allocates its members into one of two sets of gender roles, gender identities, and attributes based on the type of genitalia (Judith Lorber et al., 2007: 2).

In addition to posing a threat to masculinity and bringing disgrace to the family, Elvis' behaviour worries the father because he thinks that it exposes Elvis as an easy target of cultural change. "It's not easy to be a man. Dese are trying times," he tells Elvis. According to Sunday, the name was all that a man needed to earn respect "before dis new madness with money started" (*Graceland* 187). In a scene of confrontation between Elvis and Sunday, the former accuses his father of consenting to the killing of Elvis' cousin, Godfrey. Sunday's justification is that Godfrey brought shame to the family because he was a criminal and that the honour of the family has to be defended. "It took me years of pain, suffering and hard work to build a name people could respect," he says in response to Elvis' accusations. He explains "[w]e were white people's slaves, a curse, so we were disinherited of land, clan, everything. I built our name up with honour until it became a force to be reckoned with" (*Graceland* 187). Sunday's past is interlocked with the struggle for freedom and for social recognisability. However, this sounds absurd to Elvis who does not see any value in the name that his father claims to be defending. To him, the only thing that his father's name indicates is failure. Sunday gradually loses his authority over Elvis when the latter loses his respect for his father and no

longer regards him as the bearer of culture identity. In this respect, Christopher E. W. Ouma contends that the father-son relationship in *Graceland* is closely connected to Valentin Mudimbe's (1998) idea of "false fathers", which "questions both the myth and the reality of the father as progenitor of discourse on knowledge, power and identity" (C.E.W. Ouma, 2011: 78). The high value assigned to genealogy is threatened under the pressure of the changing life conditions resulting from the colonial experience and the continued challenges to native cultures in the face of an increasingly globalised world. Ouma states:

Traditionally, sons in Africa are born into a genealogical order: taking over the baton from their fathers, they are born 'in the name of the father.' However, the new realities in their postcolonial worlds provide for possibility and the invention of a new discourse 'in the name of the son', as Achebe puts it in the epigraph (C.E.W. Ouma, 2011: 79).

In the context of multiculturalism and urbanisation, traditional views about biological symbolism are liable to lose their significance. The encounter with western cultures imports ideas of self-invention and individualism which are reinforced in the "continual creative play of urban living" (D. Harvey, 1992: 5). The 'name of the father' ceases to matter among strangers to whom the father is unknown. Inasmuch as the father figure is weakened with the changing circumstances, it remains a key element in the perpetuation of oppression sustaining a masculinist system. What entails a 'virtuous' masculinity comes under scrutiny. Killing Elvis' cousin Godfrey in the name of honour comes as a shock to Elvis whereas it is understood as a duty for Sunday. Sunday casually expresses the naturalness of Godfrey's assassination. Whether Godfrey is an atoning victim or not, the stockwave is felt by Elvis when Sunday deliberately blurts out that, "Can't you understand? I did dis out of love for you" (*Graceland* 187). To Sunday, it seems natural to save the honour of the family even if it means killing one of its own. The act of violence is justified by protective paternal love and understood under the rubric of duty and reason. It can be said that "what were once claimed to be manly virtues . . . have become masculine vices" (J. MacInness, 2001: 314). The incident of Geoffrey's killing, along with the father's alcoholism, unemployment, and consequently inability to support his family, reinforce doubts surrounding genealogical significance and exposes an absurdity that hovers over the salience of blood ties. The authority of the father figure is threatened as traditional identity markers and social values are questioned. As an

adolescent, Elvis views his father as an oppressor, a defender of a masculinist system which does more harm than good. But the latter holds the seed of its own destruction. What becomes of 'virtuous' masculinity then? How can 'masculine vices' be read when they seek to destroy the very concepts they claim to defend?

4. Hegemonic Masculinity and Perversion of Authority: Finding an Alternative Space?

The introduction of hierarchical power in the colonial space encompasses a great deal of violence in the African patriarchal structures. Through this lens, I will explore the *macho male* mentality so often seen in patriarchal societies and the way men are conditioned to live up to idealised, hegemonic masculine traits which unveil perversion of authority. I refer to perversion as it can "be seen as a digression from instincts upon which moral and social behaviour is contingent" (D. Lapanche et al., 1988: 307). In this respect, the Colonel in the narrative embodies perverse behaviours, be it physical or sexual, with most violence exerted. My analysis does not aim at demonising men or male attributes. I intend to highlight the harmful effects of conforming to most of traditional masculine behaviours in a patriarchal structure, where men vie for power maintenance and assert their authority through the expression of hegemonic masculinity.

In one of the most disturbing scenes in *Graceland*, Uncle Joseph rapes thirteen-year-old Elvis in a chapel in Afikpo village. In a previous scene, Elvis witnesses the rape of his cousin Efua by the same man who is also Efua's father. The vulnerability of the body is exposed as the body becomes an easy target of violence and assault. If the possibility of rape is inherent in the male body, as Susan Brownmiller states, then *all* bodies are under constant threat of violation (quoted in Cahill, 2001: 16). By presenting both Efua and Elvis as victims of rape, Abani places both male *and* female bodies as susceptible to male sexual violence. In this case, rape is indifferent to the sex of the body and becomes a pure act of domination and sadism which seeks pleasure from any weaker body. However, it is not indifferent to the *gendered* body. "The gendered aspects of rape are fundamental to the phenomenon itself and are no less 'real' than biological realities" (A.J. Cahill, 2001: 33) because what rape seeks to assert is an aggressive masculinity capable of control and intimidation. Although this

assertion can be manifested in several ways, “the sexuality of rape differentiates it from other forms of violence and assault. . . . it *matters* that sexuality is the medium of the power and violence that are imposed on the victim,” Ann J. Cahill affirms, because “rape constructs male sexuality in a particular way such that it constitutes a way of imposing harm, pain, and powerlessness” (A.J. Cahill, 2001: 27). Although enacted by the body, rape is bolstered by perceptions and attitudes towards sexuality circulated in social systems and communities. Uncle Joseph abuses his authority as a father and an uncle knowing that he, as an adult man, is protected by a social system in which such abuses can go unpunished. Sunday’s passiveness about the subject indeed proves this point. The taboo and shame associated with rape lead to the silencing of the survivors and eventually burying their stories in an abandoned past. Consequently, the present imminent dangers of the problem fail to be addressed, contributing to the persistence of masculinist conceptions. Efua and Elvis’ rape completely demolishes the understanding of the family as a secure and homely space. Instead, it becomes a locale of inescapable fear and terror as the ones endowed with the responsibility of its protection are the same ones responsible for its destruction. The patriarchal structures of family, violence and sexuality clash and destabilise each other’s meanings and significations. Sexual violence, domestic in this case, ravages both feminine and masculine bodies submitting them both to a higher hierarchical masculinity, that of the adult male. This leads to the question Jasbir K. Puar asks in her study of terrorism and sexual violence: “how, ultimately, do we begin to theorize the connections and disjunctures between male and female tortured bodies, and between masculinities and femininities?” (J.K. Puar, 2007: 98) Regardless of its anatomy, the body becomes an object of assault and a site where sexuality and violence meet to express a destructive masculinity.

In the patriarchal structures, men employ violence to create and preserve hierarchies within the realm of masculinity. The state which is embodied by the figure of the Colonel, exercise violence as well. The Colonel embodies the “ultra-masculine order represented in the text by the military regime” (C.E. Ouma, 2011: 83). “Ultra-masculine” in this context would denote having more aggression, exercising more violence, and most importantly having more power. He is a typical representation of hegemonic masculinity, defined as “a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power” (M.S. Kimmel, 2001: 272). In other words, it consists of

a man who is capable and willing to exercise power and is in a position which allows it. Moreover, the Colonel flaunts his powers and uses this display as a constant confirmation of masculinity. "Do you know dat I am a full colonel?" he asks Elvis who accidentally bumped into him while dancing at the club (*Graceland* 119). As Elvis assures him it was an accident, the Colonel insists that it was an intentional assault. At this moment, "the front door of the club slammed open and six soldiers . . . came in at a fast trot. . . The six soldiers seemed controlled by a collective mind and stopped in front of the Colonel, saluting. 'Shall we take care of dis dog, sir!' the leader, a sergeant, barked, eyes ahead" (*Graceland* 119). The Colonel gives orders to the sergeant who in turn gives orders to the "collective mind" of the other soldiers to assault Elvis. The incident portrays the constructed hierarchy between the male subjects which constitutes the established military system. The military institution is but a sample of the wider hierarchical structures constituting societies and communities where men with more power subjugate those with lesser power. This is especially true when the military institution is the ruling regime. Militarism is projected into the community and its values are disseminated and normalised. Perceiving the military as a site where "power [is] exercised by senior men over subordinate men," where heteronormative sexuality is enforced and homosexuality is rejected and punished, where "power [is] exercised over men who for political or other reasons reject the military regime" (Emma Sinclair-Webb, 2000: 87), its characteristics as a ruling regime are associated with oppressive domination, heterosexism and homophobia.

Moreover, as an institution which systematically trains its members to fight and kill, the military's attitude towards violence tends to be casual. This is exhibited when Elvis gets caught during the riots arranged by the King of Beggars. Elvis is taken for interrogation, and although he had nothing to do with the riots, he is tortured severely. Several torture methods are performed on Elvis, including beating, body suspension, flogging, and pouring acid on his wounds. Whereas the torture is meant to make Elvis confess, it certainly carries a sadistic quality, for the torturer Jerome clearly enjoys his acts: "He [the torturer] smiled with a mixture of contempt and pleasure at Elvis's squirming," (*Graceland* 294). The torture thus can be understood as both a political action emerging from the state's oppressive control, and a personal and intimate act emerging from a subject's desire. This double layering is further illuminated when torture is intertwined with the realm of the sexual. Justified by the idea that

confession must happen at any cost, torture abuses the vulnerability of the body and puts it to the test. When sexual, torture abuses the vulnerability of gender binaries in order to produce a deviant subject who consequently is pushed to humiliation and shame. Jasbir K. Puar states that “[t]he performative act of torture produces its object’... the body informs the torture, but the torture also forms the body. That is, the performative force of torture not only produces an object but also proliferates that which it names” (J.K. Puar, 2007: 87). As Jerome approaches Elvis with a whip in his hand, he says that the Fulanis, an ethnic group in Nigeria, use the whip on each other to test who is man enough to marry. Violence as a measure of masculinity and manhood is again brought to light. The question of man versus boy, however, soon turns into an issue of heterosexual versus homosexual, thereby intricately inking ‘man’ to ‘heterosexual’. What is striking about this shift is that it generates the sexual with the homosexual. That is, the homosexual is brought forth as soon as the violence becomes sexual.

Whistling softly under his breath, he began rubbing a cool white paste all over Elvis’s body. It felt good, soothing almost. Jerome smiled as he noted his expression. Still smiling, he took Elvis’s penis in one hand and gently smoothed the paste over it, working it up and down. Elvis felt himself swell. Jerome laughed and massaged Elvis’s penis faster and faster. It was not long before Elvis shuddered and shot semen all over his torturer’s hand.

“So you be homo,” Jerome said, laughing breathlessly.

Tears of shame streamed down Elvis’s face (Graceland 295).

The sexuality of the torture is meant to produce a ‘deviant’ homosexual subject which will be derided and humiliated. Interestingly, this is done through queer methods. Jerome’s massaging of Elvis’s penis clearly carries a homosexual desire which expresses itself in the form of an aggressive homophobia. The homosexual subject is produced through queer acts on the basis of which queerness itself is condemned and punished. The paste which Jerome rubs over Elvis’s body turns out to be a chemical that intensifies the burning sensation of flogging, suggesting that homosexual pleasure will be brutally punished. The Colonel watches as Jerome sexually abuses Elvis and therefore condones the acts performed. Although not directly involved in the sexuality of the torture, the Colonel is the one who allows such sexuality to take place under the rubric of

investigation. His gaze confirms his approval of the acts and a pleasure derived from watching them, such that “pleasure spreads to the power that harries it; power anchors the pleasure it uncovers” (M. Foucault, 1978: 45). In the efforts to suppress ‘deviance’ and rebellion against itself and its institutions, the state creates spaces where violence and sexual ‘deviance’ are exercised under its supervision. This “*incorporation of perversions*” (M. Foucault, 1978: 42) into the disciplining system of the state employs queerness as a means to reinforce power, whereby sexuality is employed to further degrade outcast subjects.

Through the depiction of Elvis ‘uncle and the Colonel as perpetrators of physical and sexual violence in *Graceland*, Abani not only critiques both the family and the state as protectors and defenders of moral values but also identifies them as aggressors. Both emerge as flawed systems that produce abusive subjects who seek gratification from the perversion of authority and power. Furthermore, the rape and the torture occur in two different settings, thereby blurring the lines between the past and the present and the rural and the urban. By placing the rape scene in the past rural context, Abani destabilises perceptions of the village as being a peaceful, harmonic and communal space, and manifests “a tendency to reject rural and urban polarization,” as Hilary Dannenberg suggests in her article “Narrating the Postcolonial Metropolis” (H/ Dannenberg, 2011: 40). Dannenberg states that “[W]hile the novel’s rural and urban spaces are in many ways depicted as different, separate worlds, they are not subject to any polarization along the lines of a city versus country idealisation. Both are characterized as dangerous environments for Elvis,” (H. Dannenberg, 2011: 41). The common denominator of physical threat and risk renders both geographical spaces unsafe. Interestingly, finding an alternative space can make possible the fluidity of identity and a “life with meaning”.

In “Entropy and Energy: Lagos as City of Words,” Chris Dunton discusses how *Graceland* explores “a range of expressive initiatives, of critical discursive options” which produces creative energies (C. Dunton, 2008: 74). Dunton states that “[f]or Elvis . . . the chosen medium is professional dancing” (C. Dunton, 2008: 74). Elvis’ passion for music and dancing allows him to escape, even if briefly, the harsh realities of his life. Despite the hindrances and constant disappointments facing him, Elvis insists on pursuing a dancing career which alone brings him satisfaction. In addition to music and dancing, Elvis also enjoys reading and watching movies. Western movies are available to watch and different books are easily available by street sellers.

Cultural engagement in *Graceland* is intimately linked with identity formation and is part of Elvis' "negotiation of a sense of self" (C. Dunton, 2008: 74), as my discussion of the mirror scene, for example, shows. His impersonation of Elvis Presley invokes questions of his racial and ethnic belonging and his ambiguous sexuality against the backdrop of a city that is highly influenced by a globalised American culture as the recurrent references to Hollywood movies and American music clearly suggests. In *Space, Time, and Perversion* (1995), Elizabeth Grosz writes that "the city is. . . the site for the body's cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts—the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed" (E. Grosz, 1995: 108). In this sense, Lagos seems to be "half slum, half paradise" to Elvis who wonders how a place can be "so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time" (*Graceland* 7). Lagos' palimpsestic culture is inscribed on Elvis' body and manifested through his contested racial identity and sexuality. He carries the scars of its oppressive state, the memories of its struggling nation, a nationality he does not comprehend, and an ambiguous sexuality at odds with what he was taught.

In 'Suspended City': Personal, Urban, and National Development in Chris Abani's *Graceland*," Sarah Harrison contends that "although Elvis finds some solace in transnational cultural exchange, this is circumscribed by his simultaneous immersion in a global economic system that perpetuates his marginalization" (S. Harrison, 2012: 97) and delimits his creative space. His attempts at living the life he wishes and being the person he wishes to be are constantly thwarted by his lack of money and the difficulty of earning it by legal means. Questions of morality are thus forced into the complicated process of his coming of age, and the line between boyhood and manhood becomes blurred. Unlike his friend Redemption, Elvis is hesitant when it comes to certain means of earning money. When Redemption gets him involved in a cocaine packing job, Elvis expresses great concern to which Redemption replies:

'Anyway, it is not you I blame, you see? . . . I blame myself for involving a boy in a man's work.'

Elvis heaved a sigh and took a swig from his beer.

'This is dangerous, we could go to prison for this.'

'In this country you can go to prison if some soldier does not like you. At least with this you can make some money' (Graceland 108).

Redemption's statements imply that 'a man's work' is to grab money making opportunities regardless of their nature. This idea is supported by the fact of the constant casual threat one faces under an oppressive regime where one's life may depend on another's caprices and fancies, as the incident that Elvis experiences in the club with the Colonel shows. Questions addressing the nature of an identity or a sense of belonging are suppressed and held in suspension when faced with the task of survival. But what does survival mean without an identity or a belonging?

Using Redemption's passport, Elvis finally leaves for America. As he waits at the airport, he flips through James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* (1965) and comes across the scene in which a black man is lynched and his genitalia is cut off by a white man. Elvis flinches at the scene and imagines the scar it would leave. "He knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body. He and everyone like him, until the earth is aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire" (*Graceland* 320). Elvis realises that leaving his country does not mean the end of fear and threat. He cannot escape his body and what it represents to the outside world that regards him as an Other, an intruder, an inferior social being. Through his departure, Elvis will have to confront again, more fiercely this time, his native heritage, his father's struggle for freedom, his sexuality which will be stereotyped, the meaning of being a man, a black man.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, I have explored how the ideological inheritance of English colonialism in post-colonial Nigerian literature such as *Graceland* has been transformed in communicative practices that allow for the emergence of "new identities, which are neither colonial-global, nor necessarily indigenous-local" (R.M. Bhatt, 2010: 520). Even though colonialism has changed the way people lived and even what they thought, maintaining gender roles is essential to the preservation of cultural heritage which is increasingly becoming threatened by Western intrusions.

Between conforming and resisting, Elvis finds himself in an interstitial space which crosses both racial and gender binaries. He attempts to create a sense of self by impersonating his idol, Elvis Presley. However, *Graceland* ends on a bittersweet note as Elvis realises that his contested identity goes beyond his country's borders. While Elvis embodies a mutable identity in a constant state of becoming, Abani is in a position to wonder and ask to what extent such an identity will be accepted and endorsed.

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