



# Home and Belonging in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*

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**Abstract**—Home and belonging have mostly been slippery in urban spaces especially for the poor. This is because it is difficult for the urban poor who due to unemployment and dwarfed wages fail to afford a habitable home. This issue has escalated in many African cities due to the rural-urban migrations in search for a better life. This essay explores these thematic issues of home and belonging in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*. The essay argues that that urban life and experience renders home-making slippery and problematic in some of its inhabitants, especially the urban poor, hence instilling a feeling of alienation in them.

**Keywords**—alienation, belonging, home, rootlessness, poverty.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of cities is a very significant aspect to the contemporary growing African societies. However, it should be noted that different people view life in the city differently. For some, the city provides excitement because it offers opportunities for self-realization, while for others the city arouses restlessness, anxiety, and fear because of the overwhelming feelings of alienation and lack of home. This essay explores the themes of home and belonging in urban spaces in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*. An important assumption running through this novel is that urban life and experience is highly challenging and disturbing to the poor inhabitants. In this novel, Onuzo depicts poverty and unemployment as some of the main causes of homelessness among the characters, and presents rootlessness, insecurity and alienation as manifestations of the homelessness and unbelonging in postcolonial city of Lagos. The essay argues that urban life and experience renders home-making slippery and problematic in some of its inhabitants, especially the urban poor, hence instilling feelings of alienation in them. According to Crossley (2010) alienation in this context refers to the "separation or estrangement of human beings either from each other, from their own life or self, or from society" (p. 3).

Characters feel lonely and separated from relatives and friends generating senses of homelessness and unbelonging.

The general objective of this essay is to explore the representation of urban life and experience in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*. Specifically, the essay examines the portrayal of home and belonging with focus on the urban poor. In order to achieve this, the study analyses the challenging experiential encounters in relation to home making of characters in the city of Lagos. According to Myers (2010) "African cities represent major challenges" (p. 4). As such, these challenges have to be addressed if a sustainable urban future is to be achieved on the continent.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Onuzo tells a story of five runaways: Yemi (a private soldier), Oma (a house wife), Chike (an officer), Fineboy (a militant), and Isoken (a young girl) who travel from Bayelsa to a hoped better life in Lagos. Onuzo presents her protagonists in the city as lacking an actual welcoming place. When Fineboy discovers a vacant, fully-furnished abandoned apartment, the group moves there.

However, soon they are cornered by the apartment's owner, a corrupt Minister of Education, Rẹmi Sandayọ, who emerges at night running away with government money. Finally, they end up living in a water lodged slum.

Different critics have read Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* from different perspectives. Feldner (2019) locates the novel in contemporary Nigerian Diaspora to parse the presentation of the city. An important observation that the study makes is that the novels of the Nigerian diaspora represent the city in more complex ways. What the novels depict even more strikingly is the assault on the senses that Lagos presents, the way "the city creates a somatic experience that baffles the senses" (p. 62). He argues that *Welcome to Lagos* narrates "violent and gruesome practice, often in order to illustrate the state of the justice system under Nigeria's military dictatorship" (p. 62). However, Feldner does not consider the suffering of the characters in the novel as a consequence of homelessness and unbelonging.

Dunton (2020) and Ramone (2020) point out that Onuzo represents a corrupt state in *Welcome to Lagos* where corruption is a great blow to the education system. They observe that the novel offers an analysis of the ways in which education cannot support Nigerian children to achieve their potential due to the corruption ensuing as an effect of colonialism. Amongst many complexities in the city, politicians, justify their actions with reference to the pervasive corruption in their environment. This essay shows how poor urban dwellers suffer in Lagos due to poverty hence creating senses of homelessness and unbelonging in the characters.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This essay engages the views of Georg Simmel's and Garth Myers' urban theories to analyse the themes of home and belonging in the novel. In his essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), Georg Simmel identifies the effects of city life on the individual. Simmel focuses on the negative influences of the modern city on life, because the city is an artificial environment to which there are adaptations and adjustments which ultimately reflect the structures of the metropolis. He argues that "the psychological foundation upon which the metropolis individual is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" (p. 11). Simmel explains that the intensification of nervous stimulation in the city causes the metropolitan individual to "react with his head instead of his heart" (p. 17). Thus, instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan man reacts primarily in a rational manner, creating a mental predominance. In contrast to small town

or country life where the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly and habitually, the metropolis provides the individual with a barrage of imagery and stimuli. This, in turn, causes an increase in the individual's awareness and intellectuality cognitive processes that allow the individual to absorb and deal with intensified stimuli. The result, as Simmel argues, is that the modern mind has become more and more calculating.

In addition, he further observes that:

the metropolis has always been the seat of money economy to the extent that money, with its colourless and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all things.

It becomes the frightful leveler- it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, specific values, uniqueness and incompatibility in a way which is beyond repair (p. 14).

As such, the money economy has filled the daily life of so many people with weighing, enumerating and reducing qualitative values to quantitative terms. This, therefore, as Simmel argues, has resulted to complexity of life in the modern metropolis allowing the urban mentality to develop an "unmerciful matter-of-factness" (p. 19). Interpersonal and even intimate relationships become similar to monetary transactions: "the relationships and affairs of the typical metropolitan usually are so varied and complex that without the strictest punctuality in promises and services, the whole structure would breakdown into an inextricable chaos" (p. 19). Thus, Simmel illustrates how the modern city, in comparison to rural towns where relationships are established, has a negative influence on people's psyche and, therefore, negatively influences the lives of city dwellers. These kinds of relationships cannot be established in the metropolis for a number of reasons, for example anonymity and alienation, and as a result, the city dweller can only establish a relationship with currency. Money and exchange becomes the medium within which the city dweller invests their trust and most importantly, the only objective measurable achievement is of interest. Simmel's notions of alienation, unmerciful matter-of-factness and money economy are of particular interest to the current discourse on urban literature because it helps explain the nature of images and perceptions of the city in modern and post-modern literature.

The views of Garth Myers in his book *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice* (2011) and his paper "Seven Themes in African Urban Dynamics" (2010) are also crucial in this essay. Myers provides a recent model of studying the African City. In his work, he mainly dwells on the main issues prevalent on the literature on the African city. He argues in his paper

that “ cities in Africa are changing in ways that defy usual notions of urbanism, in their dazzling complexity, they challenge most theories of the urban” (p. 4) hence the need of using alternative models. Focusing on the historical background, he traces most African cities as postcolonial where the rural-to-urban migration was fuelled by the pull of perception rather than actual opportunity and by the push factors of rural landlessness, poverty and lack of employment which resulted to the urban poor habitat. For Myers, this conundrum only became more acute in many cities after independence and has so continued. He observes that “ one of the legacies of colonialism is the segregation and segmentation of the urban landscape, while another related legacy is the high degree of inequality” (p. 51). In city after city, “ formerly white or elite areas are increasingly full of gated communities and fortress compounds, while the “ dirt-poor habitat” at the other end of the segmented colonial order is even more overcrowded and destitute” (p. 52).

Myers further categorizes most cities in Africa as informal. His main focus is on the built environment, specifically the growth of informal settlements. Many African urban areas grew informally from the beginning. Myers also postulates that

If we conceive of informal settlements as only existing in relation to and as being the opposite of something we deem to be formal settlements, in the fundamental dichotomy between colonial and colonised zones that ran parallel. Colonial regimes tended to view informal areas in cities as dangerous and disorderly zones of resistance and detribalisation: no sooner had they begun to emerge than policies were devised that were geared towards their elimination” (p. 73).

Considering that many urban residents in Africa live in informal housing, Myers claims that “ increasing informalisation seems to be a euphemistic way of saying the cities are becoming poorer and more unequal” (p. 75).

As elaborated in his paper, the theme of poverty is again variability in African cities signaled by “ how unequal these cities are in socio-spatial terms” (p. 12). We can only generalize from a broad array of studies that suggest that urban poverty and deprivation are increasing across most cities and inequalities widening. For examples, Myers says that “ despite great economic strides and the growth of the overall economy, the percentage of the population residing in squalid informal slums has risen in parallel with the proliferation of gated communities with lavish mansions” (p. 12). It is clear that politics, power and influence diminish the capacity of the urban poor residents to effect changes that enhance their capabilities

to uplift themselves economically. This has led to a continuum of urban violence in Africa. He argues that “ cities now endure a continuing wave of crime and violence that runs smack into a policing problem” (p. 143). Using Simmel’ s and Myers’ arguments, this essay explores the themes of home and belonging in the novel.

#### IV. ROOTLESSNESS

Moving the narrative under discussion is the reality of rootlessness and slipperiness of homemaking and belonging in urban spaces. Since colonialism, the majority of the poor urban dwellers’ livelihood in African cities has been predominantly associated with unhomeliness and non-belonging. This has made these concepts key in postcolonial literature. For many, the choice of migrating to the city has been that expectation for a meaningful and fulfilling life. Onuzo presents her protagonists, the five runaways, in Lagos city as lacking an actual welcoming place.

The idea that emerges in the text is that the city offers no permanent settling place. Consequently, the major constraint of city life is that the marginalised are forever moving from one place to another as it is difficult to make a home, proving the slipperiness of the city. Coming from different broken backgrounds in the country, the hopes of the five runaways for a better life in the city become shattered. Eager to find a home, upon their arrival in Lagos, Isoken is escorted by the rest of the group to what used to be her parents’ home. When Isoken arrives at their rented house, she is greatly distressed by the missing of her parents who are not yet home since the fighting in their village and this means that she now has no one to take care of her. Despite this, the landlord, Mr Alabi mercilessly says that “ I would have said you should stay in the house and wait for them but you know your rent is due” (p. 67). This incident proves that home and belonging are slippery in the city as Isoken has to search for another home, hence becomes fully alienated from the people and community she is used to. This is in relation to Simmel’ s view that urban life is governed by the money economy (p. 16). For him, the rentals matter more than being merciful to the young girl. The city resists the notion of home to the urban poor, thus, urban life is depicted as bleak and merciless. Mr Alabi demonstrates that money comes at the peak of everything, more than caring for the girl he had known for some time as his tenant with her parents. Onuzo acts as a critic of the city as there are no roots in the city, nowhere to trace a home but rather only leaving the inhabitants wondering from place to place. As such, this reveals the untrustworthiness of the city.

Consequently, the titling of the novel as *Welcome to Lagos* is a verbal irony. To be 'welcome' calls up expectations of being welcomed to a specific place designated as a home, but when it comes to Lagos, this narrative systematically undercuts expectations of safety and comfort. Thus, the use of "welcome to Lagos" constructs a sense of a home and belonging where there is none since the city is associated with rootlessness. The urban poor keep on looking for home as evidenced with five new comers, such that the novel's title starkly, if not ironically, registers notions of unwelcomeness.

City habitation also manifests as lacking privacy, exposing the vulnerability of poor urban dwellers. The open places in the streets are turned into homes as the urban poor literally live in the streets. When the five runaways, including many others in a similar predicament, are forced to make the under bridge a home, they discover that the place is as noisy as a market place. Chike confides to Isoken about it that "I can't sleep with all that noise" (p. 88). Their new home is as well "like a market where hawkers sauntered by thin, agile conductors hung from moving danfos calling for passengers, people passing by and cars still clogged the road" (p. 81). Here, the turning of a public space (the bridge) into a private one (a home) is unsuccessful. Their sleep is murdered by the noise from cars as well as people. Highlighting on this, Bhabha (1994) observes that in the city there is a constant shifting and distorting of public and private space, of living and commercial space (p. 103). That is, there are no separate entities in the city as streets can function interchangeably both as homes and public spaces. According to Bhabha, "unhomeliness is a condition in which the border between home and world becomes confused, in which the private and the public become part of each other" (p. 103). In this case, the home no longer remains the domain of domestic life, since the world become its counterpart. The unhomely, Bhabha concludes, "is the shock of recognition of the world in the home, the home in the world" (p. 103). The making of home in open streets defeats the whole purpose of the idea that home should be a comfortable and private place. The lack of privacy is also evidenced when Oma wears a nightie on top of her clothes: "its lace frills crawling down her chest and disappearing into the folds of her wrapper" (p. 83) since she cannot even manage to dress properly at such an open place. As an adult woman, Oma needs a comfortable place to change her dressing; however, at this open place she suffers more from humiliation. All she can do is to wear the night dress on top of her other clothes which should not be the case, yet, as long as they are in the city, they still have to face the realities of homelessness. We are informed "they have to adapt to the art of sleeping amidst the nightly disturbances,

the indignities of furtive squatting, and the embarrassment of a buttock exposed" (p. 267). This clearly demonstrates their unpleasant experiences of the city as their right to privacy is compromised. For the poor urban dwellers, privacy remains a luxury because open places do not have the comfort a home offers. Here the public and private spaces merge. The creation of a home in the world renders the border between the two intermingle hence no privacy.

The issue of privacy in the city is further compromised since men and women who are not related sleep in one room. Chike and Oma share the cost for a room for all the five: "women on the bed, men on the floor" (p. 70). Such a sleeping plan cannot be tolerated in a country setting as it infringes on the privacy of individuals. It disables the bordering line which exists between adult men and women in terms of sleeping plan. Consequently, the closure of this demarcation tramples on the cultural protocols as only married couples can sleep in one room. The designation of a sleeping room here is over stretched from private to a public room. The distinction between the private and public is problematic in Lagos where the home and public space interchange and intertwine.

The experiences of the five runaways in the novel reveal that the city is not 'sustaining. Despite seeking accommodation in a filthy inn just for a night, they cannot afford lodging there since they do not have money; as such, the question of accommodation prolongs. At checkout, the receptionist tells the five that "hope to see you soon" (p. 80). Having experienced life in Lagos, the receptionist is guaranteed of their homelessness and hopes that they would be come back soon to seek accommodation. She is convinced that once these people leave the inn, they are bound to be moving from one place to another. According to *The Nigerian Journal* in the epigraph of the novel, Lagos is "a jungle of asylum only fit for lunatics" who can cope with such a situation (p. 35). The imagery of the jungle designates a space associated with unhomeliness where only the fittest can survive. Just like a jungle, Lagos proves to be inhospitable as new comers cannot get a permanent home. This claim is thus a true reflection of what the reader finds between the book's cover pages as their desperation for home leads to their pondering on options such as trying the beach. They further think of the pedestrian crossings that vaulted over the expressways used by livestock and humans alike where people slept under their awnings and under a bridge, which is also home to drug addicts and others that embrace homelessness and lay down beneath the concrete pillars every night. All these considerations to find a living place in the street unveils the rootlessness of home in Lagos.

Furthermore, the novel also makes references to destitute living conditions of most city dwellers. Due to the escalation of homelessness, people resort to living in informal dilapidated buildings which underscores the fact that making home in Lagos remains an emotive issue. When Fineboy chances a “vacated” house which he locates after a great search, he walks “at a pace that was almost a run” (p. 99) to notify his friends about such an opportune chance. He reports quickly when Chike asks him what the matter is, saying “A place. I’ve found to stay. Quick. Someone can enter before we get back” (p. 99). Here, Fineboy bears in mind the fact that housing in Lagos is a very difficult issue, hence, finding such a vacant flat is a rare opportunity which cannot be missed at any cost. As such, sourcing one such building means a lot as this serves as a better place compared to sleeping in the open space. All this underscores how scarce home is in the city. The flat serves as a home for the first time since Chike’s arrival in Lagos, such that he feels he has a mooring in the world once again. The flat is close to a home in that now they have a shelter, a bit of security from the open place, some house-hold materials to use, a toilet, and the women can sleep separately from the men. Yet the flat does not promise permanence as a home. Its attributes limit the feelings of being at home which testifies the magnitude of rootlessness. They are not at peace as they all fear the moment of being discovered by the owner of the apartment. Consequently, they keep on using an opening on the wall instead of the main gate since they are not the rightful owners of the flat. The use of such a hole to sneak in and out of the compound proves the fact that they have feelings of alienation from the rest of the compound dwellers. Not only considering the outside environment, the temperatures in there are very high since it is built underground. With power outages, their only source of breeze, a fan, is dead most of the time rendering their stay unbearable. This sense of entrapment in the dark makes Chike suffer from claustrophobia, depriving him of the feeling of being at home.

The city exists as a place of intersection for cultures as such loneliness creeps in. Life in the streets compels people from different places, backgrounds, as well as ethnicity cram into an open space. The under the bridge-dwellers “spoke different languages, worshipped different gods, supported different premier ship teams” (p. 87). There is no sense of belonging for the dwellers, rather fragmented ethnic and language groups stick together. Alienation and individualism rather than a sense of community crop up among them as each one stands on his or her own despite the many people found in the city. Mullin (2016) observes that “the greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive

and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs” (p. 5). Without a sense of belonging people feel anxious, isolated and unsupported. Throughout history, the idea of belonging to a community or a family has helped us to protect and define ourselves (McLeod, 2000, p. 9). The home, therefore, is supposed to be a place of love and fraternity. In dealing with ‘home’ in postcolonial literature, Said (1993) explains two links which are “filiation” and “affiliation” where filiation concerns natural links such as birthplace and family while affiliation relates to links you make at a later stage with “culture and society” (p. 8). In the novel, Oma welcomes Chike in Igbo and not in English, the language which they have been using to communicate to each other as a group. George (1996) postulates that home as a concept is related to belonging in both language and space, with homes existing on geographical, psychological and material levels (p. 17). The use of Igbo language by Oma when speaking to Chike is in search for a sense of belonging from the ‘same home’ and of the ‘same language’. Oma, therefore, evokes these notions of filiation and affiliation as she tries to deal with feelings of alienation.

In search of belonging, urban dwellers try to associate and stick to others. Therefore, this sticking together that happens in the city is after the realisation that the city is a place of deep loss, loss of home and belonging. This is seen when Chike tells Fineboy that they thought he was not coming back to the group from where he had gone. Minding the importance of his friends in the city, Fineboy responds that “How can? Y’all are my Lagos crew” (p. 82). Home and belonging connotes family. In the absence of a blood family, Fineboy leans on his Lagos comrades to have a sense of belonging in the city as the narrator confirms: “this family of five had sprung together by circumstance” (p. 138). Fineboy seems to be aware of the importance of what Simmel calls “unprecedented relationships, those which originate under comradeship” (p. 15). The emergence and existence of such relationships is due to the absence of family in the city. Compared to other locales, the city allows for a more complex system of social relationships to cover up for the lost home and family.

Although the city does not offer a permanent home and belonging, it should be acknowledged that the city fosters a different kind of home and belonging. The five runaways temporarily can afford a comfortable home and belonging in Lagos. When the five come to dwell at the under bridge for the second time, they experience a fierce fight between the gangs and they quickly move away and become stranded at night. Their desperation prompts Chike to call Ahmed in London for help who connects them to

his father, Bola Bakale, in Lagos. Bakale rescues them from homelessness as he accommodates them in his house. Contrary to their expectations, they are warmly welcomed to the house. We read:

... they saw the cream sheets and felt the cool air blowing from the AC vents: three large rooms between five of them. For the first time in years, Chike had a room to himself, the smallest of the three. Their meals came on silver trays, brought by a maid who lived off the premises. Their first evening, they had all crowded into Chike's room, Oma and Fineboy bundled in the white towel robes they had found folded on their beds (p. 272).

The above description of life in Lagos represents the ambivalent nature of Lagos city. Since their arrival in Lagos, the fugitives have never been in a comfortable home with enough rooms, enjoying the cool air and in fact being served with food. Though the city is inhospitable, it fosters some other new and different forms of home and belonging. Furthermore, Onuzo recreates the urban space as a hybrid space punctuated by both the merciful (those concerned with the suffering of others) and the unmerciful (those that do not consider others but rather only minds their own business like Mr Alabi as earlier discussed). The fact that Mr Bakale does not personally know the five runaways but still offers a warm welcome to them contravenes with Simmels' s generalised view that city dwellers are merciless and charged up by the money economy. Mr Bakale's character here shows that not everyone in the city upholds to the power of the exchange value of money.

Moving from the praise of the city, the places that some poor Lagosians call home have a squalid and disturbing environment. Onuzo presents the slipperiness of home by painting a gritty picture with a malaise of urban poor people living in flooded slums. Myers observes that one obvious manifestation of informalisation in African cities comes in the settlement structure. Built illegally, Crankshaw and Parnell argue that shack settlements "are vividly opposed to the order and regularity of state-built formal housing and, within the constraints of poverty, they reflect the individual aspirations and styles of the residents. Shack settlements are sometimes volatile" (quoted by Myers p. 107). The conditions of Makoko slum are so disturbing such that Yemi fails to comprehend the fact that the water city settlement also exist in Lagos. Thinking it is outside the Lagos borders Yemi says: "It's time for me to go back to Lagos" (p. 284) Sabo asks him: "Where do

you think you are?" (p. 248). Yemi is really troubled to see that people in Lagos could be living in such informal housing and disgusting conditions. The unstable composite homes described in the Makoko slum reveal their literal absence of a foothold in the city. This proves that the homeless are geared towards finding home even if the environment proves unaccommodating. Such cramped, haphazard construction of the shacks found throughout the city's slums, just a mess of narrow alleys that wound around squat, ugly bungalows and shacks provide a stark contrast to the expectations of the city. This is what prompts Myers to argue: "It is a truism that many urban residents in Africa live in what are called informal settlements" (Myers, p. 70). Poor urban residents are left with no option but rather to live in slums since they cannot afford good houses.

In comparison to other slum settlements, Yemi laments that he has seen villages built on the sea in the Delta but nothing of this magnitude as Makoko. We are informed:

Everywhere he looked, the grey houses and their rusted roofs spread like a sheet. Lightweight canoes moved between the buildings, their owners paddling lightly to steer. They were selling things, drifting from door to door, passing up plates of... Some residents had taken to emptying their waste by their houses and the rubbish drifted together in small islands in the water.' 'Where do you have your bath?' 'In the water. It's enough for everybody' (pp. 247-248).

Lagos is densely populated with poor living conditions as evidenced with Makoko slum. The search for home becomes so pathetic to the extent that dwellers live in water lodged areas where movement from one house to another is dependent on canoes. It is so disgusting to comprehend that such a place can be habited by people as the rubbish makes small islands in the same water which is used for bathing. The description makes an overwhelming sight which baffles the senses. Emordi and Osiki assert that "African cities are nowhere close to being world cities. Rather, they are largely sites of intensifying and broadening impoverishment and rampant informality operating on highly insubstantial economic platforms through which it is difficult to discern any sense of long term viability" (p. 3). Despite slums being located in the city, it is with great concern to note how people live since they cannot have access to social services provided by the city council. Onuzo's depiction of slum settlement in Lagos resonates with the portrayal of slum in Abani's

*Graceland* (2004) where the protagonist, Elvis, struggles to survive in Maroko slum. Abani also seems more interested in exploring the slipperiness of home in Lagos city. Thus, the plight of homelessness goes beyond lack of housing, and includes improper housing like shacks and makeshift housing. Contrary to the title of the novel, the situation remains unwelcoming in Lagos with no hope for the future. Home and belonging have been negatively depicted in the novel with most characters feeling alienated, hence, representing urban life and experience as very challenging.

## V. INSECURITY

Beyond rootlessness, the issue of homelessness exposes insecurity. City spaces are insecure and unsafe, a concrete reflection of lack of home. Whilst the five newcomers are homeless and uncomfortable under the open bridge space, they are demanded to pay for the 'security services' by Emeka, the Chairman, of the under bridge dwellers. He says: "For security. We're stopping armed robbers and bad people from coming to this place" (p. 82). The fact that the five are forced to pay for security services shows that insecurity hovers on the city; dwellers survive amidst violent and dangerous situations. This then results in urban life and experience being more challenging in that the porosity of home greatly raises the issue of security. Emeka confirms that the under bridge is attacked by armed robbers and bad people. This emphasises the fact that they are left with no choice, the city is dangerous and safety has to be sourced through money. Suggestively, urban dwellers put much effort in search for protection from violence. This undercuts the city of the qualities of home. Writing about Lagos, Emordi and Osiki (2001) observe that "the rapid urbanization has led to a multiplicity of problems involving mass transit, open space, housing inadequate infrastructure, slums and squatter settlements and other problems associated with human beings in the urban environment" (p. 99). Thus to survive in the streets, dwellers meet multiple challenges. The two women and three men are charged the money despite the fact that the place is just at an open space, not anything close to be called a home but rather under a mere bridge, the more reason why Chike wonders: "where else must one pay to be homeless?" (p. 83). In Lagos city, money indeed rules everything as in reality the five pay to be homeless. As such, urban life and experience is entangled with complexities and alienation which the poor bear witness to, rendering the space sterile, bleak, and engulfed in suffering and pain. The author depicts the city as a place that is gloomy, depressing, and inhospitable.

Insecurity is furthermore highlighted through the physical description of Emeka, the prizefighter's body, as being mapped by "archipelagos of scar tissue" (p. 82). The archipelagos imagery with which Emeka's body is described symbolises how unsafe and cruel urban life is for the homeless. Thus, the scars on his body are a representation of the violent straits that Emeka has fought in the name of security and defence. This proves that Chike's city platoon cannot even protect itself from the idiosyncrasies of this city.

The streets further dissolve the comfort and safety which a home offers, leading to rampant violence. Muggah (2012) observes that the history of cities is intertwined with the search for protection from, and the containment of, violence (p. 18). When the five runaways go to settle under the bridge for the second time, they experience a night attack. Chairman and his boys had made enemies. During the fight, Chike reports seeing two rifles, sticks and steel, the pop of glass bottles shattering like fireworks over dazed heads (p. 269). The night attack under the bridge exemplifies the insecurity which results from homelessness. Thus, insecurity escalates the problem of home as evidenced with the running away of the five from the violent scene in search for a safer place.

## VI. BURDENSOME URBAN POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

In relation to the issue of home, the novel also conveys the pressure of poverty in the city as the key factor which causes homelessness and exacerbates a sense of belonging. As a consequence, Lagos is also associated with informal homes and squalid environment. Makiwane, Tamasane and Schneider (2010), in their study of the societal origins of homelessness, also contend that, factors that contribute to becoming homeless are poverty, unemployment, a lack of affordable accommodation and underprivileged childhood (p. 3). Homelessness, therefore, is just one of the most striking faces of poverty which results in lack of some things deemed essential in human life. Unemployment, poverty and homelessness go hand in hand as many scholars argue that poverty results from unemployment, and unemployment is clearly linked to homelessness.

Poverty makes the urban poor lack a meaningful life. The poor city inhabitants are seen suffering from a heavy burden of poverty which makes it difficult for them to find a home and other necessities such as food. Highlighting this issue of homelessness, Onuzo's five newcomers lack a meaningful life in Lagos as they cannot afford a home. According to Chike, for one to have a home, belonging, and fit perfectly in Lagos, one has to

have money. We are informed: “ Money answers all things [...]. How to make something of yourself in Lagos? Money. To get any respect in this city? Money” (p. 117). A look at Chike's observation reveals that life for the poor in the city is associated with misery and suffering. His reflection here provides a better reason why the poor are rendered destitute in the streets. When one does not have money, as is usually the case with the poor, it becomes a challenge to survive because everything in the streets demands one to have money. One fails to afford a comfortable home and to operate normally in the city spaces. Without a home, one is bound to continued suffering. This is a true reflection of Simmel's observation that “ city life is regulated by money” (p. 16); without money, urban life and experience tends to be very hostile. Money is the central valve of life in the city. The very value of humanity is lost at the expense of poverty in Lagos, all what is left is mere existence. Consequently, urban life and experience renders home-making slippery and problematic in some of its inhabitants, especially the urban poor, hence instilling a feeling of alienation in them.

Much as cities hold both the promise of economic opportunities and social mobility, they are hosts to massive poverty and social exclusion. Living conditions in Lagos are punctuated by pressures on home arising from the rampant poverty plaguing the cityscape, which is accelerated by unemployment. Employment has been one of the major pull factors to the city since colonialism. Myers notes that “ under colonialism, rural-to-urban migration seems to have been fuelled as much by the pull factor of perception as by actual opportunity, and by the push factors of rural landlessness, herdlessness, involution, poverty, and lack of employment” (p. 53). As such, employment has become more elusive in many African cities as many people flock there.

Onuzo brings the theme of unemployment to the limelight in a chapter where Chike and Yemi move around the city looking for employment to show that it is not easy to get a job in the postcolonial Lagos. She writes: “ With the UK charity Jobs Plus estimating that over two million people are unemployed in Lagos, the jobless of this city outnumber the populations of Gabon, Luxembourg and Kiribati combined” (p. 72). The use of such statistics is an anguishing exposure of the bleakness of the employment market in Lagos such that Chike and Yemi wander in the city to no avail. Narrating such an ordeal the narrator observes:

His search for a job had become frantic, almost panicked. He and Yemi ranged the city, tramping where they could, taking buses when they could not, riding

into the financial district with its glass buildings that distorted reflections, stretching them into thin, long, powerless creatures. They stood in queues, watching others ushered forward because they bore the right talismans, runic Mercedes symbols sketched on conspicuous keys, chunky gold watches, no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment. Marx was writing of Lagos, surely p. (p. 86).

The author employs Karl Marx's ideas to show how the notion of power and money manifests itself in Lagos when it comes to getting jobs. In Lagos, much as people stand on meandering queues in search for job opportunities, those with power and money are ushered forward and possibly offered jobs at the expense of those deemed poor. The poor are made to stand on the queue for a long time. Thus, the poor in Lagos are alienated when it comes to employment opportunities, leaving them with no option for a standard living space or anything close to a home. According to Chike, “ Lagos was a jungle, an orderly ecosystem with a ranked food chain, winners and losers decided before they were born” (p. 86) that is to say, their destiny is predestined. The jungle imagery that Onuzo uses in reference to Lagos city symbolises how harsh conditions are for the poor. Like in a jungle, those deemed to be kings trump on powerless. This is a concrete referent to how the poor continue suffering while the rich and powerful in Lagos exploit them. This dislocation is directly linked to the early establishment of the city as a colonial space for capitalist exploitation.

With few jobs available, coupled with desperation, some opt for tenuous and poorly paid jobs to make ends meet. Thus, even if one does casual work, it remains a hectic issue to get a home from the stunting wage. Both main and minor characters are not spared from this predicament as evidenced by the unfortunate under bridge dwellers. Even if Chike and Yemi manage to grab a shoddy job by chance which does not befit Chike's qualification, the conditions are that they have to work on half pay as the other 10000 Naira has to be given to Godfrey who has offered them his job. Despite being a degree holder, Chike sacrifices his qualification for the sake of survival in Lagos as it proves difficult to land into a job befitting his studies. In such a financial situation, it remains difficult for the five runaways to get a home hence they continue living at an open space under the bridge. In his view of informal cities, Myers (2011) highlights that “ researchers document an increasing casualization of labour (with increases in part-time, seasonal, temporary



employment) so that the city's still noticeable formal economy is surrounded by extremely high levels of unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment" (p. 93). Thus, non-permanent employment further worsens the problem of home in that workers are subjected to low and periodic wages which affects their flow of income. We further see this in the novel where some of the bridge dwellers such as Yusuf and Mahmud, teenage brothers from Kano, who have been displaced due to religious riots in Kano. Despite the fact that they are both working in an abattoir, they fail to afford a home obviously due to the small wages they are paid. Clement the welder, his wife and child, are also subjected to the same homelessness although he has a job. Thus, though some of the bridge dwellers have managed to get employment in Lagos, they cannot afford to get a proper accommodation. As Chike says "rent was pegged at mocking prices. For a few square feet in a slum, fifty thousand a year and a payment of at least six months in advance. Where would he find that on his halved salary?" (p. 97). The small wages that the workers earn cannot sustain them in habitable residential areas; as such, they are forced to live within slums, shacks or even open places. This is in line with Myers' (2010) argument that most African cities struggle with overcoming colonial inheritances of poverty, underdevelopment, socio-spatial inequality and coping with globalization (13). The luxurious homes of the city's rich residents are made possible by the cheap labour of the urban poor.

Poverty further compels the urban poor to live in substandard housing. Cinková (2010) argues that the consequences of poverty and unemployment affect human dignity profoundly (p. 12). When the runaways escort Isoken to her parents rented house, they discover that the house does not befit one in the city. As the door is opened, "it shudders, termites scuttling, alarmed and incensed by this assault on their food" (p. 66). The description of the door that it is being attacked by termites reveals that the house is made of cheap materials and that the landlord fails to control the termites. Living in such a house deprives the family from the feelings of being at home. Obviously, the family occupied this house because of lack of enough money for a good home as the family survived on a small business of a salon. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Isoken enters the house to search for money in a pillow foam, she finds nothing. Bearing in mind the quality of the house they were living in, the family could have survived on hand to mouth. Commenting on urban poverty, Nuttall and Mbembe (2008) argue that African cities are growing demographically without necessarily developing economically (p. 6). With the increased

population many urbanites struggle to survive in the city since they do not have viable sources of money.

Onuzo also captures the effects of poverty on home by presenting life in Makoko slum as another residential area for the poor. By re-imagining the city from the perspective of its poorest population, Onuzo challenges elitist responses to Lagos's social and infrastructural problems. The presentation of Makoko is very shocking as shacks are built on water: "some houses were squat, with doorsteps almost level with the lagoon" (p. 248). Dwellers use the same water for bathing, for toilet, as well as for fishing for their survival. This is a clear indication that the slum does not have access to social services such as piped water from the city council; hence, putting people's lives in danger of contracting diseases. Onuzo's extended engagement with the vagaries of slum existence creates a suggestive metonym for the inconsistency of the postcolonial nation-state, allowing her to effectively diagnose and critique the causes of the disparate living conditions of Lagos's numerous residents, those so desperate since they are too poor to find a standard home. Chike, Yemi, Oma and Fineboy quickly learn about its easy accessibility and finally settle there.

Slums are in total opposition to the city's well-constructed buildings. Writing on the uneven development, dual nature of the city, Manase (2003) observes that the city is interestingly "a two cities in one city" (p. 11). This captures the way in which the African city is mapped into two different segments, the affluence and modern town planning on the one hand while the other is dominated by the poverty stricken urban squalor associated with existence of social and moral decay. Bissell supports Manase arguing that:

If African cities have indeed been attempting to subvert or eliminate the colonial legacies they inherited over these postcolonial decades, then fairly often it must be said that one is hard pressed to see the result. In city after city, formerly white or elite areas are increasingly full of exclusive and infrastructure-rich gated communities and fortress compounds, and the 'dirt-poor habitats' at the other end of the segmented plan of the colonial order are even more overcrowded and destitute. Postcolonial regimes have often improved upon the strategies of colonial administrations, becoming even more exclusivist, authoritarian, and segmented (pp. 25-32).

Most African cities struggle with overcoming colonial inheritances of poverty, underdevelopment, socio-geographical inequality and coping with globalization. It goes without mention, therefore, that poverty is one of the major factors that lead to the slipperiness of home-making. Characters experience the reality of city life where it is hard to survive, let alone find a standard home because they do not have money. Myers further explains that these such settlements built within the constraints of poverty are vividly opposed to the order and regularity of state-built formal housing and they reflect the individual aspirations and styles of the residents. He observes: "the settlements are densely packed, overcrowded, and sometimes volatile" p. (p. 94). What is explained by Myers here is a case of absolute poverty. The United Nations defines absolute poverty as a "condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information" as evidenced in the text through the black urban inhabitants (p. 26). The poor and the downtrodden endure endless suffering because of lack of money.

Due to the harsh life, impossibilities are worked on to become possibilities in the city. In the novel, the five runaways spend a night in a filthy room in an inn. Much as it is an unusual arrangement for men and women to sleep in the same room, the group has no choice as they do not have enough money to meet the cost of separate and standard rooms. The conditions of the room itself are decrepit and disturbing. The narrator says:

In its centre was a large brown stain, some waste product excreted or blood released, the mark too spread out to be ordinary menses. Blood from a deflowering perhaps, a quaking teenager and his girlfriend, fumbling until they soiled the sheets. Oma began to lift the mattress. 'Please come and help me. It's heavy.' Chike and Yemi joined her. Only Fineboy remained aloof on the floor. 'Don't bother,' the boy said when the mattress stood straight, needing only a push to be flipped over. 'Why?' 'The other side is worse.' Chike walked round and saw the green growth, spiralling in all directions. 'You don't want to see,' he said to Oma (p. 68).

Issues of hygiene should be taken with serious measures. Normally, one would expect the city council to monitor the hygiene of such places but the reality is pathetic. Furthermore, when Oma takes her bath, she finds some

curly hairs, possibly pubic strands, stark against the white tissue which had been left in the drain. Disgusted, Oma takes her bath quickly and carefully, not wanting water to splash back from the walls. To show her discomfort she does her bathing quickly to be out of this disgusting bathroom as soon as possible. Such nauseating description of an inn calls for serious actions from the city council. As lodging places for visitors, hotels are designated to give a first impression of the city. Highlighting on poor delivery of services in African cities, Myers blames it all on poor governance of cities. He argues: "African urban governance problems often play a central role in the creation of outside authors' negative or nightmarish depictions" (p. 55). Thus, the negative portrayal of the cities has largely been because of the underperformance of the councils. Makiwane et al. explain that "the social challenge of homelessness cannot be isolated from the broader context of massive unemployment and widespread poverty that characterises our society today" (p. 2). As such, homelessness is just one of the most striking faces of poverty which results in lack of some things deemed essential in human life. Characters experience the reality of city life where it is hard to survive let alone find a home if one does not have money.

## VII. ADVERSE EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS ON IDENTITY

Finally, in relation to the issue of home, the novel also conveys the pressure on the self in the city through the illustrations of the characters' lives. The lack of sense of home affects the selfhood of an individual. Characters reel under psychological pressure in the face of homelessness and unbelonging. They are alienated from the city. These feelings of vulnerability and lack of sense of selfhood should be viewed from the city's harsh realities and can be explained from both the social and economic impact on city life. The lack of home consumes the sense of the self which manifests in the dwellers' suffering from restlessness and anxiety. This arises due to feelings of rootlessness and disconnection from the rest.

The lack of home compels the poor urban dwellers to live a very pathetic life which is associated with loitering and moving around aimlessly. As such, the urban dwellers' life is dominated by restlessness and anxiety. Onuzo presents Yemi as emasculated in Lagos. He feels unsafe and increasingly longs for freedom outside of the confinements of the flat. She writes: "Against the statistical odds, he had succeeded in becoming a tourist in Lagos" (p. 246). Yemi feels uncomfortable and yearns for a free space and hence keeps on strolling the city aimlessly. His movements, therefore, illustrate the

bleakness of life in Lagos and how entrapping the city is. As a result, the negative influences of the city that Simmel explains, such as alienation and isolation, are all visible in Onuzo's novel. Much as the whole group is alienated and isolated from the city. Yemi further alienates and isolates himself from the rest of the members by becoming a Lagosian tourist to avoid being trapped in the flat.

The same restless identity in contemplating urban life and experience is noted in Chike who feels left out, vulnerable and exploited. As the leader of the Lagos platoon, Chike's burdensome poverty traumatises him to the extent that he becomes psychologically affected; the city begins to pick at his self-discipline. Speaking on trauma and its effects, van der Kolk and McFarlane observe that "all individuals experience trauma or traumatic experiences at some point in their lives. However, the difference in individuals is in the way that they deal and cope with the traumatic experiences" (487). Chike does not cope well with the stress in the city as while working as a traffic controller on half pay, he fights a stranger with a brief flurry of fists and knuckles. Without any inquiry about the squabble between the man and the girl, he misinterprets the scene thinking that the man's girlfriend is in danger when she screams. Yemi warns him that he needs another job as he does not concentrate on the current one: "Your mind is not here. If you dey concentrate, how your eye go reach dat side?" (p. 110). This action shows that Chike has been traumatised by poverty as well as exploitation since he is having a dysfunctional sense of self and has become delusional. Largely what the city has done to him is to destroy his selfhood. Though professionally trained as an officer in the army, his training makes him no better in terms of discipline. Therefore, the resultant city life has an alienating effect on the inhabitants, more especially the poor.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

In *Welcome to Lagos*, Onuzo demonstrates that home and belonging are central issues in urban spaces. The five runaways search for home in the city which is, to all intents and purposes, un-homelike. The unhomeliness of the five runaways in Lagos signify the difficulty of urban life for the poor urban dwellers, depicting it as challenging. Urban life is, therefore, defined by homelessness and is devoid of belonging. Onuzo further laments the poverty situation in the city as being a root cause of homelessness. In the city, the poor are subjected to insecurity, poverty and suffering. Coupled with unemployment in the text, poverty worsens urban life and makes home elusive. Furthermore, the novelist exposes identity crisis which

manifests due to homelessness and unbelonging. The city's impersonal, socially and economically alienating characteristics, lead to the urban dweller's fragmented psyche. The picture of the city that emerges in the text is therefore that of pain, suffering and dislocation.

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