

Interrogating the Literary Representation of an Exceptional Group in Society - Old People

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Abstract

*Ever thought of old people in any sense other than just being old people? This paper gives attention to old people who are an exceptional group in society by acknowledging their presence and importance. People generally perceive old people from the point of myths and stereotypes that surround old people. A few can distinguish facts from myths about old people. Old people have duties and responsibilities in African societies. Any negative impact on old people's life, might it be physical or emotional will reflect on their performance. They fail to play their roles as expected by the society. The oppressive and exploitative systems that are found in Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the rain* and in George Lamming's *In the castle of my skin* are some of the determinants of the behaviour of the old people's characters in these texts. The main thrust of this paper is on old people of African origins and how the old people relate to their respective societies from an Afro-centred approach. To be centred calls for African-ness to be the basis on which the world is viewed, judged or weighed from. Afrocentricity as a theory advocates for the change of the African person from seeing self from the other. An African viewing self from a Eurocentric point of view would definitely create problems and unnecessary commotion.*

Keywords: old people, acknowledging, myths and stereotypes, duties and responsibilities, oppressive and exploitative systems, African origins, Afro-centred approach

1. Introduction

Old people are always part of any society in the world. Old people, also referred to as the aged, are human beings who are fairly fragile when exposed to conditions that are detrimental to human life. In Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the rain*, the old people are victims of colonialism and displacement. Colonialism in Africa brought about challenges that affected the black people and the old people included. In, *In the castle of my skin*, the old people are victims of displacement, slavery and colonialism. These are some of the abnormalities that have a direct and negative impact on the behaviour and character of the old people, yet these old people never become irrelevant or rejects of history. The older they get, the more important they are because they stand as a bridge between the past and the present.

Experience is the best teacher, the older one is, the more experienced one becomes in life issues. McPherson (1990) notes that preliterate societies had no written languages, therefore, knowledge, beliefs and survival skills are found in memories of those with greatest experience, the elders (p. 46). Old people are able to give advice basing on previous experiences and knowledge carried down from generation to generation. Old people are disregarded, rejected and ignored in societies yet they carry a people's history. There is need to continue accessing knowledge from them for they are carriers of history and old people are custodians of a people's philosophy of life. Wisdom comes with age thus old age means wisdom. One may ask, why should society neglect old people? Why send them to the alms houses? Old people are role models on what a family, a society or a nation looks upon and builds a brighter future anchoring from the old people's knowledge base.

Looking at scholarly works, much attention is given to colonial issues, post-colonial issues, gender related issues, war, the media, economic and social situations and other issues, but little or no attention is given to old people.

Even in society, old people are stigmatized by virtue of being old. Myths surrounding old people contribute massively to their further isolation and rejection. Also from within the home sphere, old people are ill-treated, misunderstood, ignored, abused and mostly no attention is given to them. The treatment that old people receive does not tally with their importance. Old age is a phase in a lifetime and it occurs to individuals at certain times. It varies from individual to individual with a number of factors contributing to the aging of the individuals. McPherson (1990) argues that the patterns and processes of aging vary among individuals and groups depending on social, environmental, biological and psychological factors (p. 17). Regardless of how one gets old, the bottom line is that old people are important.

Since old people are human beings, they are equally vulnerable, important and need equal attention and care. This paper serves as a plea to societies, scholars and other people to revisit thoughts and attitudes towards old people. Yet today in many African countries, old people are left with the task of looking after their grandchildren following the demise of their parents due to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Old people are put in old people's homes and the alms house as noted in *In the castle of my skin*. It appears as if being old creates problems for those that will be living with the aged and, as a result, old people's homes and the alms house are created. Sending old people to such institutions implies the marginalisation and isolation of the aged from the natural society. This points to segregation and negligence on the part of the aged. Old people are believed to have foundational values of a society and are the prototype. Their existence is marginalized yet they are custodians of a people's philosophy of life.

2. Old People in Waiting for the Rain

Waiting for the rain is a novel authored by a prominent African writer, Charles Mungoshi, which exposes the ills that African people encountered as they endured the colonial terror. This section of the paper focuses on the old people as depicted in *Waiting for the rain*. People in Africa lived a different life before the Europeans came. The advent of colonialism was a transition that changed the whole set up of African existence. This directly impacted on the respective duties that individuals were expected to carry out in the African societies.

In *Waiting for the rain* the old people characters are the Old Man, Old Japi and Old Mandisa. These characters have been exposed to colonialism and are victims of the plague. *Waiting for the rain* is set in colonial Zimbabwe in Manyene Tribal Trust Land. This reserve is a colonial construct and the people living in that area are victims of a system that is oppressive and exploitative. This was a result of the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 which saw black people being relocated to reserves, paving way for the white settlers to occupy the fertile lands like the Hampshire Estates in *Waiting for the rain*. One of the key motives of colonialism was to see the down fall and obliteration of the colonised thus the old people in *Waiting for the rain* are crumbling down. Zhuwarara (2001) notes that:

His (Mungoshi's) narrative strategy is to convey the process of disintegration from the point of view of different key members of a family. There is the old man, sekuru, together with his bedridden wife, Japi, and mother in-law Mandisa; they are all ailing members of a dying generation with vivid memories of the pre-colonialist past (p. 50).

The departure of these old people would mark the end of a generation. The old people carry a people's culture, values and history and have the duty to carry down that knowledge to the next generation, which will in turn carry that same knowledge to the next generation that follows and it goes on and on.

In the case of *Waiting for the rain*, the old people are unable to carry out their roles as expected of them as the environment (colonial times) they are living in only promotes the disintegration of black people's families. So the passing on of these key members of a family would see the Mandengu family crippling and eventually the deterioration of the black nation. A nation is built up by small parts of families, and anything that hinders the growth of a family will automatically hamper the growth of a nation. Garabha is a wandering man, uncle Kuruku lives in Bulawayo, Kuruku's son Peter is in prison, Kuruku's five children are in exile in Zambia, Lucifer at the mission, Sekai is at a secondary boarding school and Betty is restless because she cannot find a man to marry her. The family members are scattered all over the country as each member is pursuing a different occupation. These characters are supposed to seek solutions to their problems from the old people present and that is the Old Man, Mandisa and Japi as to why they are failing to live together as one family unity. The biggest challenge is now the environment in which these characters, both the old and the young are living in, which is not accommodative.

The environment perpetuates and permits the family unit to be plagued by confusion which incontestably ruins the whole conception of a family.

Though colonialism has managed successfully to physically displace the old characters and their family into the Manyene reserve, it has somehow to a greater extent failed to defile the Old Man and Mandisa but has thoroughly contaminated Japi. The strong love for sugar that Japi has developed, symbolically confirms the infiltration of colonialism and its manifestation in her behaviour. Japi is very lazy and craves for material things such as sugar which do not complement with African values then but rather further denigrates the fundamental nature of being African. Instead of being an icon on which the young generation emulates, she isolates herself and resorts to feigning her illness. She begins to blame the people she lives with for not giving her care and attention because sub-consciously she knows that everyone knows that she is a pretender. She is of the conception that old people are always ill and cannot care for themselves. Stratton (1986) comments that

Through Japi, he (Mungoshi) demonstrates the pervasive influence of western culture. She who should be an embodiment of her cultural heritage has developed a mania for an imported product. Hooked on sugar, she lives for nothing else, even going to the extent of jealously guarding her stock in this once communally centred society against her grandchildren (p. 17).

Thus, Japi as a colonially contaminated figure fails to share material goods such as the sugar and the immaterial such as knowledge. African societies are communally based, meaning that they share almost everything, collectively work and live together as a family. Japi fails to adhere to these simple African principles by allowing colonial domination which lacks African-ness in all its terrain. Her behaviour is the manifestation of colonialism and what it does to its victims. Japi constantly feels that she is neglected and rejected when in actual fact she is not. Betty from Raina's instruction serves her food in the morning and even family members who visit them enquire about her health. Thus in African societies, old people are never left to die or neglected and labelled as invalids. With that, Japi asserts the stereotypes and myths that surround old people. Mungoshi must have included an old character like Japi so that the reader may understand and appreciate the worthy in the Old Man and Mandisa. Otherwise Japi is a flat character, not admirable and neither sincere.

Old people are custodians of traditional values as noted in Mandisa and the Old Man in the way they conduct themselves. Stratton (1986) notes that, "the Old Man and Mandisa have a wisdom and dignity which is denied the other characters, and they possess a resilient, a tremendous inner strength, which springs from the awareness of who they are and where they came from." This makes the Old Man and Mandisa the bearers of true African identity. That consciousness in them of being able to identify with their African cultural values and knowing who they are helps them develop that ability to tell the short comings of the foreign culture brought by the settlers. Their use of appropriate African proverbs in the day to day conversation provides life teachings and gives a lasting impression of the core richness of African culture and values. Old people are in families and societies so that they drive and control the whole communal structure by providing proper teachings. In *Waiting for the rain* Mandisa is fond of using proverbs as a means of reminding and as well as for teachings as noted when she states, "he who remembers you is yours 'our mothers used to tell us'" (p. 65). From an African perspective this proverb encourages people to cherish the relationship that is created and that exists between people who frequently visit and enquire on each other. This teaching was passed on to Mandisa from her late mother and now she takes it on to the next generation.

Mandisa also teaches about the importance of rising up early in the morning. A well-known English proverb says that an early bird catches the fattest worm; this is also applicable to the African societies. Mandisa passes on an important lesson to Garabha about the importance of waking up early in the morning. She says:

Then I repeat: they are all fools. Because, and I want you to hear this especially now that you might be taking a wife soon - you can tell what kind of a womanshe is by her waking-up habits. If, when you shake her to wake her up and she pulls the blankets over her head saying: "Huhn, huhn" then I advise you to look for another one. You have married trouble. The same with a woman who gets out of bed at the same time as her man. That's why our mothers used to tell us that it was taboo - sacrilegious in fact - to wash up this night's plates on the same day as the meal (p. 96).

African teachings do not necessarily need a specific venue or specific time to be carried out like the European classroom conventional method. In Africa, anytime is tea time. Any slightest chance is convenient for the imparting of knowledge.

Like in this case, Mandisa and Garabha were talking about Lucifer who was still sleeping when the sun was already up, and Mandisa takes advantage of the theme of 'rising up' in their discussion to advise her grandson Garabha about the qualities of a genuine African woman as identified in the above quotation. Thus Mandisa shows devotion as noted in her actions as she dutifully carries out her role as an old woman of African origins.

The same traits of imparting knowledge in an African way are demonstrated when the Old Man speaks to Garabha and tells him the history of how they lost the First Chimurenga and how they eventually got yoked to the white settlers' bondage. The Old Man is a defender of his national sovereignty as noted by his participation in the First Chimurenga. The Old Man in his narrative emphasizes the importance of knowing one's history, showing the criticality of Afrocentric tenets. The Old Man hints to Garabha on how to identify colonial victims when he says, "Each time I see my wife Japi take in a handful of sugar, I know how complete and final the white man's conquest has been" (p. 115). This shows how the Old Man is disturbed and troubled by colonialism. The Old Man ends his speech to Garabha by saying:

Yes. I talk to you about this because I feel it's going to help you some day. Times and events change, but I don't think people change at all. And if you remember this you won't be in any trouble at all because you will be playing your own drum. You may not live to see this land return to you, but what's that to you or to me if your drum remains your own? As long as you play hard and listen to what it says, and follow what it tells you - enough. Let them or whoever wants it, have the land. You keep your heart. Later on, you too will know that what grows on the land, what you see outside, first grows in the heart. Without first taking root in the heart, whatever grows outside quickly withers and dies. And they can touch you on the outside, but they can't touch your heart. That's your drum. And that is my medicine to you (p.117)

The Old Man emphasizes the importance of cherishing and treasuring one's culture and identity. He knows that the knowledge he has imparted to his grandson will help him and the generations to come. They will know who they are and where they are coming from hence where they are going. The Old Man thus proves that old people are calabashes of history of a family, a people and a nation. Zhuwarara (2001) asserts that, "the Old Man is a keeper of memories of the origins of the family and is there to provide a historical perspective to a society he sees in danger of losing its soul in the new world (p. 51)." However, the Old Man can be criticised for being simplistic on the issue of land. One's culture is based on the land and the Old Man fights colonialism on the level of culture. He does not understand the impact of colonialism at a global level.

The Old Man maintains his African-ness and defends it by the way he conducts himself. By orating the history to his grandson Garabha, it shows how crucial and effective orature is in an African society. Through oral literature the Old Man links the past and the present of the people of his family, their history and how they became to be what they are. Zhuwarara (2001) adds that; "As such the Old Man's role in African history is to act as a conduit of the collective consciousness of the African past and its identities and pass it on, however diluted or indeed distorted it is, to subsequent generation" (p. 55). The Old Man acts as a middle man who connects the past and the present. He carries down the cultural values of African people from the past into the present through oral literature. Chinweizu (1985) states that orature is the incontestable reservoir of African values, sensibilities and aesthetics. Thus African cultural values are embodied in African oral literature.

The drum that the Old Man constantly refers to is symbolic. The drum symbolises African culture and values, the essence of being African and the African-ness and rootedness that typify one as African. To be associated with the drum, understanding its symbolism and embracing its significance makes one an authentic African. Zimunya (1982) states that, "the drum is a metaphor for the Old Man's faith in the old traditional values of Africa. It is a symbol of individual identity as well as the collective hieroglyph of his culture" (p. 70). Japi is playing another's drum as noted by the way she embraces colonialism and so do the other characters like John and Lucifer of the younger generation. From an Afrocentric point of view they are deemed decentred as they cling to a foreign culture whilst discarding their own African cultural values.

The Old Man suffers alienation which could be a result of authorial ideology. The other family members fail to understand the Old Man and his ways because they have been tainted by colonialism - a system that strips a nation of its wealth, identity, religion, culture and beliefs. Colonialism acts as a barrier that prevents the proper channelling of cultural values from the old people, Old Man and Mandisa, to the generation of Tongoona and Raina and that of Lucifer, Garabha and Betty.

The colonial religion introduced to these characters in *Waiting for the rain* sharply contrasts with the African religion and ethos. Mungoshi could have simply allowed the Old Man apply his power and ability to resist the forces of colonialism as an extrovert rather than as an introvert. Thus the gap between the old people and the other family members is further widened and doomed for non-recovery, resulting in the death of a nation.

The function of old people in a society or family is to maintain the essence of cultural values and making them the point of call on all issues pertaining to life. Mandisa is the outstanding candidate with the calibre of a typical old person. Mandisa is aware that quarrelling and arguing does not provide solutions to any problems. Mandisa, acting as a mentor, quickly quells down a possibility of an ensuing questioning and arguing session between Lucifer and his parents. This is noted when:

Then Old Mandisa says: 'why don't you tell him straight away what has happened? From whom do you think he is going to hear these things? All this of letters that were not answered is over. Now you tell him exactly what you wanted to tell him in your letters.' (p. 54)

Mandisa acts wisely by preventing a possible eruption of a dispute. She provides a solution and at the same time maps the way forward. Thus Mandisa shows total commitment to her roles as expected of old people an embodiment of peaceful conflict resolution. She keeps the family members together and does not encourage quarrelling. From her, society learns that disputes can never be settled by quarrelling or arguing but rather by dialogue and arriving at a compromise.

African societies are deemed communalists and live by the *ubuntu* philosophy. Mandisa reinforces this African value of sharing and passes that knowledge to her family members. In Africa, sharing brings people together and encourages unity amongst the people while selfishness promotes individualism. The selfishness that is portrayed by the old character Japi is not a true reflection of a typical old African person; hence Japi is a character to be derided. That attribute of sharing is noted in Mandisa when she says, "since when have we learned to return empty baskets to people who have given us something (p. 67)." This shows that sharing as a value of African culture was ever in existence and as noted by the markers of time *since when* in Mandisa's words. Mandisa even prepares *nhopi* (pumpkin porridge with peanut-butter sauce) and gives it to Japi who is equally old as she. Mandisa believes in sharing and that epitomises her as a typical African old woman imbued with *ubuntu*.

3. Old People as Portrayed in *In the Castle of my Skin*

George Lamming's *In the castle of my skin* exposes the histories of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean. The Caribbean is linked to Africa through the slave triangle. Thus black African people in the Caribbean are of African origin. Old people characters also feature in this novel, which is the main thrust of this paper. The old characters are Ma and Pa, who are victims of slavery, colonialism and displacement. The slave triangle illustrates how the Africans in the Caribbean got to be where they are and how they were uprooted from their native land. The slave triangle also explains why and how there is a link between the Caribbean and Africa exists.

In the novel Lamming paints a beautiful picture which tells a very sad story. This text is set in colonial Barbados and the village that the characters live in is a colonial construct just like Manyene Tribal Trust Lands in *Waiting for the rain*. The old people in, *In the castle of my skin* are of African origins, they got to those islands as a result of the slave trade. The old characters are Ma and Pa who have a twisted past due to the exposure to slavery and colonialism and their subsidiary institutions. This section pays attention to the way these old people react to slavery and colonialism; the ways these oppressive and exploitative institutions impact on these old characters, and how the old people view life after being compulsorily exposed to such institutions which have highest levels of human degradation.

The slave industry had high levels of psychological damage on the part of the victims (the African people) and the damage became inherent and hereditary to the generations that followed after that era of slavery. The old characters, Pa and Ma, have the trauma of slavery still infused in their lives and also in the lives of the black people of the village they live in. Lamming (1994) in the introductory of the novel has this to say:

It was not a physical cruelty. Indeed, the colonial experience of my generation was almost wholly without violence. No torture, no concentration camp, no, mysterious disappearance of hostile natives, no army encamped with orders to kill. The Caribbean endured a different kind of subjugation. It was a terror of the mind; a daily exercise in self-mutilation. Black versus Black in a battle for self-improvement (p. xxxix).

This shows that the Africans who were now residing in the Caribbean suffered from a mental subjugation, for they could not tell where they had originated from. Their history had been erased and replaced by a deformed, distorted and spiritually meaningless life. The process of being transported, translated and transplanted had a ripple effect on the Africans in the Caribbean. The physical torture and the mental torment drastically transformed the core functioning of the African being. Thus the characters Pa and Ma are hinged to a meaningless life. They have been somehow transformed into zombies and can only respond to the oppressor's plea.

Pa and Ma know their history. Pa's dreams are a representation of the relation to their history. The dream in the novel gives a clear description of how the black people lived in Africa before the coming of the white people, the way they traded as communities, how they traded with the white traders and eventually the slave trade. Pa fails to link up anything that he would have dreamt of and all he knows is that he always had strange dreams. Pa through his dream has a mental migration back to Africa. Though Ma has the opportunity to hear Pa relating this whilst in his dreams, neither can she interpret correctly, relate or understand the meanings of the dreams. Ma interprets the dreams from a religious perspective because that is how her mind has been conditioned. This shows that the system that these old people got exposed to, mutilated their capabilities as old people. It is only the reader who can interpret Pa's dream, which it refers to the history and origins of the black African people who have been physically and mentally removed from their native land Africa.

Religion is the opium of the oppressed. Ma out of ignorance is deeply absorbed in religion and has all her life and hopes inclined to the bible. Religion is used as a tool that perpetuates further domination of the oppressed. As a product of both slavery and colonialism, her mind has been conditioned that she cannot think or act outside the expectations of the oppressor who has conditioned her to think that the Negro race can only find solace in heaven after they are dead. Ma's life is centred on the bible and she embraces its teachings wholeheartedly, not knowing that it is the same bible that is supplementing her denigration. Ma's loyalty to the religion and the bible is noted when she says:

It ain't matter, Pa, 'cause 'twill pass away in God's good time. You got to keep thatat the bottom o' yuh min' an' don't forget it. You got to think o' tomorrow. 'causeit is part o' today, an' yusef what goin' to happen tomorrow. 'Tis tomorrow I think 'bout, Pa, tomorrow, when the clouds pass away an' the roll is call up yonder an' I'll be there in the said same company as my Lord an' Saviour Jesus Christ(p. 89).

Ma's way of thinking is influenced by the bible and this shows how effective religion is in facilitating the aims of the oppressive system. It becomes very ironic that Ma talks about tomorrow being influenced by the present, but not knowing that the past also influences the present, and that it is the past that influences the present and the two help shape the future. She knows her history and cannot dutifully impart it to the villagers because of the conditions that surround her. Ma's history is within her and a few villagers would understand her. Ma finds religion as a source of inspiration and solace. She does not know how she got to be in that situation and neither is she aware that she is in a terrible situation. All she does is look up to the bible and put all hope in the life she has never seen but has been taught about. The religious indoctrination was severe and it worked for the oppressors as it helped the oppressors to have absolute control over the black people. The more religious the slave master was the more tyrannical he was. Ma is a calabash of history for she is the 'old woman who talked about slavery' referred to by the little boys on Empire Day. Ma is aware that they were slaves and had come from Africa. Pa and Ma's children are never mentioned in the novel and no relatives of them either. Nobody in the village knew exactly about these old people's origins for none of the villagers was related to them in any way. The narrator says in the text:

Pa and Ma, I thought. I wonder what did to Pa and Ma. They weren't related to us by blood, but they were Pa and Ma nevertheless. Everyone called them Paand Ma. They were the oldest couple in the village, so old no one could tell their age, and few knew what names they had besides those that we had given them, Pa and Ma (p. 14).

Pa and Ma lived alone in their home in poverty just like any other people in Creighton village. Lamming could have deliberately left out these old people's children and relatives in the story so that there is an understanding on the effects of these oppressive systems which greatly discouraged black family bonding and had black people's families fragmented (Mlambo, 2011). Like colonialism in *Waiting for the rain*, the Mandengu family members are scattered all over the country and there is no sense of family bonding. If a family is bonded then the nation is bound to be in existence hence resistance from any forms of oppression.

Pa worked in Panama and contributed to the development of the region but now he is old and is not recognised at all and only gets a very little pension which keeps him and Ma alive but made sure they stay in poverty till they die as noted in: Once a week, on Saturdays, the old man went to town to collect their pensions which amounted to a few shillings a week. But the goat gave milk part of which they sold, and the pigeons were always breeding. They seemed quite healthy and always looked quite happy except when there was some calamity (p. 80).

The pensions did not cover the basic needs, so Pa and Ma had to subsidise by selling extra goat milk and rearing pigeons for meat supplements. The use of the adverb 'quite' in the above quotation shows the vagueness of the health and status of Pa and Ma. The story is being narrated from G, a child's point of view which also gives the general view that society has to Pa and Ma. Regardless of the colonial rule they were living under, Pa and Ma appeared to be leading a life good enough in the eyes of the villagers. Pa no longer provides any services in terms of manpower and physical strength because of age and thus the system has discarded him.

Pa and Ma are the oldest people in the village and they carry the peasant consciousness in them. Ma tells the villagers that they were truly slaves, thus imparting the history of the villagers of their origins. Pa and Ma were slaves themselves and are testimonies of the brutalities of colonial islands and slavery. Ma eventually dies a poor old woman with hopes of finding everlasting good life in heaven. Pa finds himself being relocated to the alms house. Since Pa and Ma had no mentioned children, they also had no relatives to look after them in their old age. Thus when the land was sold and Ma had died, Pa was left all by himself and thus relocated to the almshouse. The head teacher knew what the alms house entailed. The way the head teacher approaches Pa to tell him that he was being taken to the almshouse appeared like a kind gesture, as though to say he (the head teacher) was very thoughtful, grateful and very considerate of Pa. He wanted to buy the spot that Pa's house was built on. In fact, his gestures are that of a wolf in a sheep's skin. The description of the alms house leaves a lot to be desired:

The Alms House was a house of charity. But this charity was of a certain kind. This charity had nothing to do with love or compassion, a human compulsion to offer where the offering met a definite need. The AlmsHouse was a kind of appointed State burden. It was the unwelcome task of preventing old age, poverty and disease from spreading into the nuisance that was inevitable if certain people were left unattended. Everyone knew that, those who served at the Alms House as well as those who were the victims of that service. The residents often seemed reduced to so many bundles of bones held together and covered with what might once have been flesh. The head teacher recalled his visits to certain Alms Houses and the state of the objects he had seen stretched out on beds. Those who were strong enough walked about in the yard, but the paralysed or acutely tubercular remained inside, caged in their impotence. Certain sections of the Alms House had become the refuge of those tubercular cases which would not be admitted to the general hospital. This was the disease that carried the greatest social stigma. He had seen many of them during his visits. There were also the deaf and dumb, the blind, those who were swollen, sore stricken and in some cases apparently leprous. When they heard you approaching they would try to raise an arm to receive the customary copper. If the nurses were around they would try to make signs. On such occasions the nurses were their greatest enemies, and he often wondered why the nurses grudged them the pittance. And sometimes it seemed strange, too, that they should care to ask for money. They couldn't leave the beds, but it seemed that begging had become a habit which they substituted for some other activity. He had seen them often and in different stages of dying, and he had often wondered why some of them hadn't been helped in the effort to get out of their pain. They were an incredible shocking sight. They were no longer men, but objects of certain gestures, cries, and with an apparatus that could register pain in extreme (pp. 252-3).

The description of the Alms House simply means a closing chapter of life for the old people. The Alms House is a place for dying, a place where old people are placed while they wait to die. The conditions at the Alms House are extremely poor and act as catalysts that speed up the death of the old people resident to the institution. Everybody knew the meaning of the Alms House and so did Pa. Pa knew that going to the Alms House signalled the end of him. Pa did not dispute and neither did he contest for he had no choice. All he did was cry as he tried to come to terms with reality:

The old man tried to say something, but his voice was choked with a kind of grief deeper than anything he had known. He was like a child in the shake of his limbs and with the tears on his face (p. 257).

This shows the vulnerability of old people in life. They are people with feelings that can be hurt like any other person. The fact that Pa had been betrayed by people of his colour like Mr Slime created unrest in his mind. This is what Lamming (1994) meant when he said, "black versus black in a battle of self-improvement (p. xxxix)."

The head teacher comes with the idea of sending Pa to the Alms House so that Pa paves way for the place the head teacher intends to purchase and own.

The Alms House is a ruthless institution that provides the most dehumanising and demeaning service to the old people. This is a culture that promotes the segregation, rejection and discarding of old people by families and societies as they are considered as useless and a burden. From an African perspective, old people are never discarded or rejected. Old people are forever part of the family as they contribute to the family and nation building through the important roles that they play. The creation of the alms house, an equivalent to old people's home does not exist in most African contexts. These are foreign cultures that are exotic to African ways of living. They pose a threat to African culture as they run parallel to African philosophy of life which respects life.

4. Conclusion

African societies cherish and treasure the presence of old people in their families and societies. The history of the Mandengu family is at risk of being wiped out of the lives of the Mandengus. Their cultural values are overtaken by the influences of colonialism, which is the major cause of the breaking down of African families. Old people who are supposed to be the custodians of a people, a nation's history, are the ones which the oppressive system lures into its traps in order to destroy the essence of being a black African nation.

Old people are part of every society. Old people in the diaspora suffer displacement, dislocation and identity crisis. They do not have that sense of belonging because of the history that trails behind them. Juxtaposing them with those in Africa, there is a common trend that old people by virtue of being old attract respect as noted in *Waiting for the rain* and *In the castle of my skin*, though there are instances when they are considered as invalids and useless objects in society. From an Afrocentric standpoint, old people are assets and are deemed repositories of a nation's history, for in that history, African culture and values are embedded.

In *Waiting the rain* the old people are just waiting as the title of the text suggests. They do not know what the future has in store for them. The old people are just anticipating nothing for the land they are living in is barren, the area is drought stricken and at the same time the country is under the colonial yoke of the white settler regime. In, *In the castle of my skin* the old people are helpless and do not know where they are coming from and where they are going. Their life is just floating in the air because of the conditions they are subjected to.

The old people in both texts are subjected to some form of oppression and exploitation from the same oppressor. Old people in Africa suffered colonialism and displacement while those in the diaspora, the Caribbean, suffered slavery, colonialism, rootlessness and displacement. These forms of oppression are degrading and make the victims susceptible to further denigration as they get shelled to a system that is too powerful to break through.

The oppressive system lacks respect for the old people including the other age groups. The system is designed in such a way that it manifests in the same way regardless of geographical location. Zimunya (1982) observes that the black man's universe is the same in Zimbabwe as it is in all those other areas of the world where man has been systematically dehumanised by the colonial experience (p. xii). Thus Pa and Ma in the Caribbean, Barbados, Creighton village, have the same disrespect from the colonial system as Japi, Mandisa and Old Man in Rhodesia, Manyene Tribal Trust Lands. De Waal (1990) observes that, "the oppressor makes a claim to tell you who you are irrespective of your intention, will, preference, performance (p.17)." Pa and Ma lost their identity. When slaves were shipped to the Americas, on their arrival they were sold and immediately acquired new names after their new masters' names, dropping off their African names, marking the loss of their identity. Their history too is lost and they were made to forget their culture and their land of origin. These slaves were forced to adopt foreign cultural values which paralleled with African cultural values. They got exposed to extreme conditions of brutality under their slave masters. Life was unbearable and painful as well. Thus the slave masters had total control over the black people and treated the black people as the slave masters wished. The black man was forced to identify self as a slave by the oppressors.

In, *In the castle of my skin* the death of Ma and the sending of Pa to the Alms House marks the end of a generation. Pa was a source of history of the black people in the Caribbean and taking him to the Alms House paves way for the extinction of the black people's history. Ma dies a religious old woman because the system had conditioned her to embrace the foreign religion. Ma could not capture their history that was given to her through

Pa's strange dreams. Gyekye (1996) observes that people in their individual homes make up a nation. When the character of individuals degenerates, the character, capacity and quality of life of the whole nation are affected: such degeneration leads eventually to the decline and fall of the nation (p. 67). Thus the melting away of crucial members of a family, the old people would mean the melt down of a nation's culture and values.

The old characters are portrayed from an authorial ideology. The ideology can be shaped by the way the authors were tutored. In this case both Mungoshi and Lamming received colonial education which conditioned them to see their people, culture and history as inferior to that of the coloniser. Though Mungoshi and Lamming had their backgrounds built on a colonial foundation, they are able to recognise the importance of old people. The writers give the old people a fair ground to show their importance through their characterisation. Thus Mungoshi and Lamming write and depict old people from a realistic point of view. Their depiction of old people is Afro-centered as the old characters reveal a true reflection of old African people.

The paper concludes that Africans in the Caribbean diaspora are of African origins and were victims of slavery and amongst them are old people. The old people were psychologically traumatised and lost their history and identity. They had no identity and they lost that sense of belonging. Pa and Ma knew about their history. They had been subjected to slavery and colonialism and Ma had resorted to religion as a means to escape reality, not knowing that the same religion is part of the oppressive system.

The oppressive system is designed in a way that it manifests the same results regardless of geographical location. Slavery and colonialism are capitalist tools that are used by oppressors to overpower and overrule their victims. These oppressive systems are structured in that they target the core or the tape root of a nation and that is the old people, who in any nation are crucial members for they carry a nation's history. The history they carry has a people's culture and values embedded in them. In slavery the victims were endowed with new names and immediately stripped of their African cultural values. In colonial times the old people had their children and grandchildren exposed to colonial education and foreign culture which was completely against African practices as well as African values, thus a gap was created between the generation of old people and that of the subsequent generations. The gap did not allow the interaction between the old people and the young. The interaction promoted the transmission and imparting of African values to the young generation. Thus the old people became irrelevant to the society as their teachings were no longer accepted.

In order for old people to play their roles and carry out their duties, there is need for an environment that is conducive and suitable for human habitation. Exposure to oppressive systems has a direct impact on the old people and it detracts their effectiveness to their families and to the nation as well. Hazan (1984) observes that, "Old people are supernaturally wise, that is to say, possessed of a perspective on reality of an entirely different order to that of ordinary persons (p. 30)." This unique ability of being wise can easily be clipped by conditions such as slavery and colonialism which are the highest levels of human degradation. Thus with these conditions in place old people fail to perform as expected. Pa and Ma had their wisdom and knowledge tempered with and thus could not provide any useful contribution in terms of the history of the black people in the community they were living in. Pa and Ma got disconnected with their land of origin but had their history with them.

Old people are therefore important figures in society and in Africa the system of old people's homes and alms house did not exist until it was introduced by the white man. The old people's importance is noticed by the way the old people are cared for and considered as part of the family and the society as well. The alms house is a representation of a foreign culture of European origin which encourages the discarding and disowning of old people. Pa is sent to the Alms House so that he waits for his time to die whilst in that institution. In Africa the Old Man, Mandisa and Japi all stay together with the Mandengu family and they are not isolated from the rest of the society but are in fact part of them. Thus African culture recognises the importance of old people and values their presence hence staying with them together as a family. The alms house thus becomes a bin for discarding rejected old people in families and society.

The roles that old people play in families and societies tag old people with a value that is worth more than the value of any money, silver or gold. They hold the life of a nation and this insinuates the value attached to old African people. A society without old people as part of them is like a tortoise without a shell, it is not secured but rather susceptible. The elimination of old people is the elimination of a family and eventually the elimination of a nation's culture and values.

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