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‘Money Answers all things’:

Wealth as Means of Belonging in Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos*

Lagos is one of the largest cities in Nigeria situated in the south-west of the country. The city serves as an unofficial capital to the country and an important economic centre with its ports. The importance of Lagos started to take shape in the early twentieth century during the colonial period. The city attracted to its space large numbers of Nigerians throughout the years under the spell of its ‘glamour’ (Gikandi, 2016, p. 395) and the dream for better opportunities for a better life. Like in reality, in fictional works by Nigerian writers, Lagos is continuously used as a central setting for their narratives. Since the work of Cyprian Ekwensi in 1963, *The People of the City*, Lagos started to be viewed as a space with its own authority and power, “a character” in itself as argued by Killam (2014). Since then, we see Lagos as a central setting in narratives about colonial resistance, civil wars, family, friendships and so on. However, while at the same time being a space of collectivity, the city has its own dark side. In this paper I discuss Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) where the characters need to obtain money, or any form of material wealth, in order to be safe in the city.

The novel is about the journey of the five main characters escaping from different forms of violence and threats to Lagos. The story opens in the Niger Delta discussing the pollution crisis and the conflict characterising the area. Here, we are introduced to the characters of Chike and Yemi, an officer and soldier, respectively. Despite their position in the army, Chike and Yemi end up escaping the institution as a sign of their refusal of the torture and unjust treatment the army uses towards the villagers in the area. In their escape, they meet Fineboy, a young militant member and Isoken who gets lost in the forest after an attack on her family's village. The four together take a bus to be away from the area heading to Lagos. On the bus, they meet Oma, who joins them after telling Chike that she is running away from her abusive husband. The five characters consider their trip to Lagos as their escape to a heaven, an escape to a place that will provide them with safety. However, upon reaching the "welcoming" city, the characters are faced with its hard life. Poor, alone, and jobless, the characters have to fend for themselves in a city that measures a person's worth with how much money they own.

Chike, the focus of this study, is the one who gets shocked by the city the most. Chike, the disciplined officer, the educated, and the father figure of the group confesses to Oma that 'Grown man like me, I'm scared of Lagos' (Onuzo, 2017, p. 67). Chike's fear is justified. Despite the impression of the prosperous and glamorous life of the city, the writer goes deep into the alleys, under bridges, and slums revealing the struggling parts of Lagos. Before reaching the city, the narrator describes it as: 'It was like London, they said, everything was new and expensive. Big cars, models you would never see anywhere in Nigeria. Large houses. *Money everywhere* [emphasis added]' (p. 66). The question of money is important when discussing Lagos. As mentioned earlier, a city like Lagos grew as a result of 'inward migration' (King, 2015, p. 35) where people from different parts of Nigeria moved from the rural regions to the city. Despite the

different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds Nigeria has, Lagos managed to marginalise these differences as stated by the historian Yusuf Bala Usman: ‘you would find Nigerians who were Lagosians by identity and who spoke Yoruba, but who may not be Yoruba by origin’ (as cited in Mamdani, 2012, p. 105). In his argument on the question of belonging in the studied novel, Dunton (2020) explains that the characters have to navigate their differences and find a suitable strategy in order to survive. Their survival in what is supposed to be a haven is tightly linked to their ability to secure enough money.

Once in the city, the five characters face their first problem; homelessness. None of the characters have a relative or a friend they can stay with – Isoken is kicked out from her parents’ apartment due to not paying rent and Oma decides not to stay with a relative in case her husband comes searching for her in the city. This leads the group to end up under a bridge among other city dwellers. Even though a public space, under the bridge is ruled by a gang and their leader, the Chairman, who asks them to pay ‘for security’ (Onuzo, 2017, p. 96). At the beginning of chapter 16, Onuzo provides a snippet from *Nigerian Journal* on unemployment that states that in Lagos, more than two million people are unable to secure a job. This account comes in time to reflect on Chike and Yemi’s journey around the city for days looking for a job. As the narrator tells us, those who have key chains with Mercedes symbol on them or wear golden watches get accepted for the work they are applying for. This led Chike to imagine Lagos like a ‘jungle’ where ‘winners and losers were decided before they were born’ (p. 100). Such experience results in a shift in Chike’s identity as he starts to lose the military discipline he once had. He also comes to realise that, by being jobless and homeless, no one is going to notice or recognise him, in case his army commandor was searching for him. This sense of inferiority remains with Chike even when he and his group end up inhabiting the abandoned house of an escaping former ministry of education,

Chief Sandayo. However, in the process, the group ends up with a large sum of money that was hidden by the Chief. As the leader of the group, Chike is now between two conflicted options. On the one hand, he is not a thief to take money that does not belong to him. On the other, he learned the hard way that to be make something of oneself in Lagos, money is the answer.

The other group members have their view on what should be done with the money. Fineboy, who found the place, argues that they should divide it and each goes on his way. Isoken thinks that the money can be used so she can finish her studies; opinions that Chike does not agree with. After much debate, it was decided that the money should be used to supply schools that lack the needed materials. The novel goes on to show how after the police finds about the abandoned house of Chief Sandayo and captures him, along with whatever remained from his money, the group goes back to under the bridge. After an attack is made on the sleeping people under the bridge and the inability of the Chairman to protect them, the group – except Isoken who manages to secure funding for her education - moves to a small house in the slums. The area is in the lagoons and known for its dirty environment, but it is the only place the main characters can own for free. Away from Lagos and out of the city, their financial status is not important to belong and be one with their surrounding community. Eating what they fish from the lagoon, Chike, along with Oma, Yemi, and Fineboy, settle in a place that will not push them on different directions like Lagos.

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