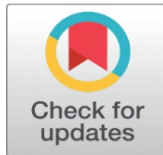
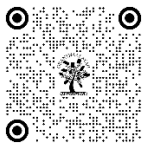


CULTURAL TRANSMUTATIONS: MIGRATION AND IDENTITY IN THE WHITE MASAI

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ABSTRACT

Adapting to a new environment is a gradual process, with the pace of transition differing for each individual. The autobiographical novel 'The White Masai' tells the story of a German woman whose life undergoes a dramatic transformation after she meets and migrates to be with her "Masai warrior." Through her narrative, Corinne explores both Western and Masai cultures, highlighting the gender inequalities prevalent among the Masai tribes and the identity crises she experiences. The Masai people maintain their ancient rituals, customs, and simple lifestyle. This paper primarily projects the harsh realities of Masai tribes, their culture and the displacement trauma experienced by the author.

Keywords: Transculturalism, Patriarchy, migration, displacement

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic groups that practice unique traditions while retaining distinct social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics stand apart from the dominant societies in which they reside. These indigenous communities, found worldwide from the Arctic to the South Pacific, are often rooted in specific countries or geographical regions. A defining feature of these peoples is their self-identification as indigenous individuals, alongside a strong connection to their territories, natural resources, cultures, beliefs, languages, and knowledge systems. Corinne Hoffmann's autobiographical novel 'The White Masai' offers a glimpse into the life and culture of one such indigenous group, the Masai tribes. Historically, the Masai were semi-nomadic and predominantly settled in Kenya and northern Tanzania, emerging as a dominant tribal group in the early 20th century. However, they faced significant challenges in modern Africa, struggling to retain their territory and often unable to resist the advances of armed British forces. In contrast, other tribes in Kenya adapted more readily to contemporary changes. In 1904, the Masai signed an agreement that resulted in the loss of much of their best land to European settlers.

As culture evolves into a blend of different elements, transculturalism emerges from the dynamics of power related to language and history. The term was first coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 to describe phenomena in Cuban society and served as a substitute for acculturation. It gained prominence during the cultural turn of the 1990s and is closely associated with cultural theorist, Wolfgang Welsch, who examines the transition from a focus on distinct, isolated cultures to a more fluid and interconnected understanding of culture (transculturalism). He highlights the significance of interactions and exchanges between cultures. The concept “emphasizes the transitory nature of culture as well as its power to transform. Transculturalism particularly examines how language wars are shaped and conducted historically” (Exploring Transculturalism 24). Transculturalism addresses cultural encounters and their implications for societal, political, and economic structures, as well as for cultural identities. He notes, “Culture is an assemblage of imaginings and meanings that may be consonant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous, or discontinuous. These assemblages may operate through a wide variety of human social groupings and social practices” (23).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Edward Said in his work, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, reflects that “Displacement is not just a physical movement but also a profound change in identity and belonging.” The major factors that influence the Transcultural society is the availability of transportation and communication, the prestige of the transmitted culture and its people, migration and adaptability of the recipients of the new culture. Transnationalism, on the other hand, is a term that covers political, social and cultural aspects beyond the national borders. It became popular during the 1990’s, to explain the migrant diasporas, complicated economic relations or culturally mixed communities that are increasingly characterized in this modern world. It can act like a vehicle of globalization. Corinne’s novel, *The White Masai* narrates this transcultural and transnational adaptations made by the protagonist Swiss citizen who tries to adapt to a new culture, the Masai tribes’ culture, for her lover, Lketinga, the Masai warrior.

Corinne, the Swiss woman, endeavours to embrace Masai culture for the sake of her “warrior,” while also introducing some cultural changes to the largely illiterate society by opening a “Samburu” shop near their manyatta. She brings various products from her homeland, including antiseptic cream, a doll for Saguna, a tape recorder for Lketinga, and a new skirt for Mama—all of which are warmly accepted by the Masai tribes. Traditionally, the Masai relied primarily on milk and meat for sustenance, but with Corinne’s arrival in Lketinga’s world, she enhances their quality of life by spending more on their needs and providing medicines and new food items through her shop. The Samburu shop proves to be a great success, leading some workers and community members to ask her to transport beer and soft drinks in her car for them. She reflects on this transformative experience, noting how her efforts have positively impacted the lives of those around her. She writes,

Our shop assistant knows a bit about technology and has taken the battery out of the car to fix it up to a cassette recorder: we have sound! In the meantime, a goat’s been slaughtered, and two boys are butchering it. We have lots of volunteer helpers, and Lketinga is spending more time delegating tasks to other people than dealing with them himself. By half-past seven everything is ready: the music’s playing, the meat is sizzling on the grill and people are queued up outside the backdoor. Lketinga takes the entrance money from the men, women get in free, but most of them stay outside peeking in and giggling. (250)

Transculturalism highlights the very complex transmutations of culture that can be phased in acculturation and deculturation. Acculturation focuses on the transition of one culture into another culture and the acquisition of features of this new culture while deculturation is the parallel process that ends in a loss or uprooting of home culture; and transculturation highlights the creation of new cultural phenomena. It does not seek to privilege the semiotic over the material conditions of life, nor vice versa and accepts that language and materiality continually interact within an unstable locus of specific historical conditions.

It locates relationships of power in terms of language and history. In the last part of the novel, there is a trace of transformation in the appearance of Lketinga, who always appeared as a Masai warrior by wearing traditional clothes, jewellery and long hair and showed how his tribal customs had changed,

The way he looks throws me: he’s cut his long red hair short and got rid of some of the decorations he usually wears on his head. I can accept that, but his clothes look ridiculous: he’s wearing an old-fashioned shirt and dark red jeans that are far too tight and too short. His feet are in cheap plastic sandals and instead of his normal languid stroll he’s walking stiffly (289)

Economic transnationalism refers to the movement of money, people, goods, technology, and human capital across national borders. In this context, Corinne invests her resources from her homeland into her new life with her husband and his family. She reflects, "The idea of having a Land Rover and becoming independent inspires me, but because my money is in Mombasa, it means undertaking the whole journey again. I'd have to get my mother to transfer money from my Swiss bank account to Barclays Bank in Mombasa" (87). Corinne maintains connections with her family through phone calls and visits, often returning with new products or ideas from her culture.

Immigrant transnationalism involves the exchange of social and cultural ideas across borders by foreign-born residents. Adjusting to a new culture can evoke a range of reactions and emotions. Through her marriage, Corinne Hofmann encounters the more challenging aspects of life in Africa, facing a cultural experience that is entirely new to her. An educated woman who initially came to Mombasa, Kenya, for a holiday, she finds herself committed to a life as a Samburu woman after falling in love with "her warrior," who is illiterate and deeply rooted in his Masai customs and traditions.

3. DISCUSSION

Cultural shock sets in for Corinne as she confronts the stark differences between her home culture and the new environment, leading to feelings of displacement and conflict. Unsure of how to interact with those in authority or forge friendships, she grapples with unfamiliar food and eating habits. In the Masai tribe, for instance, "men can't eat meat or food in front of women. They are not allowed to eat in the presence of a woman; they can drink tea" (24). As she adapts to the Masai way of life, Corinne must also acclimate to their traditional foods, which include a mixture of milk and blood. She becomes aware of the prejudices faced by native women, illustrated when she asks about the meals for Mama and Saguna. Lketinga responds with a laugh, explaining that "certain bits of the animal are for women, and men don't eat them" (81). This experience highlights the complexities of navigating her new identity within a culture that is both intriguing and alienating.

Corinne comes to understand that education and language play pivotal roles in shaping one's life and experiences, especially in the context of migration. The language and cultural differences between her and Lketinga create a barrier that hinders their ability to comprehend each other's perspectives and emotions. She realizes that people often become impatient or even prejudiced when they cannot understand one another: "He's looking at us and speaking a language that neither of us understands" (3). In her new environment, Corinne discovers that only Lketinga's brother James is educated and proficient in English, while the rest of the family remains illiterate. This linguistic divide complicates her interactions within the tribe, as her command of German leaves her unable to communicate effectively with her partner, who speaks only a few English words. Corinne's struggle with language underscores the challenges that accompany migration, as she navigates her new life in a culture that is both rich and foreign to her.

The Masai society is characterized by a patriarchal structure, resulting in significant gender inequalities for women. Corinne's Kenyan friend, Priscilla, sheds light on the realities of Kenyan culture and the treatment of women by men. In Masai tradition, there are strict perceptions surrounding marital relations: "A man never touches a woman below the stomach, and a woman is not supposed to touch a man's penis" (21). A Masai man is permitted to have multiple wives, provided he can support them. Girls can be married at a young age, sometimes as early as twelve or thirteen, with their husbands often being much older, sometimes thirty-five or older. According to Masai customs, when the eldest son's first daughter reaches maturity, she is typically given to her grandmother to assist her with chores such as gathering firewood and fetching water. During her time in the hospital, Corinne becomes acutely aware of the struggles faced by Samburu women. When these women give birth, their male counterparts often remain indifferent, viewing childbirth as "a woman's business" while they enjoy time with their other wives.

The recovery and adaptation phase marks the final stage where individuals come to a realistic understanding of the similarities and differences between their home culture and the culture they are adapting to. After Corinne becomes the mother of Napirai, she begins to follow the rituals prescribed by her husband's family. In the first week following her return to her husband's home, visitors come to see the baby, but both her husband and Mama advise her against allowing anyone to see Napirai, fearing it might invite evil. This contrasts sharply with Corinne's Swiss upbringing, where new parents proudly introduce their babies to family and friends. Eventually, Corinne adapts to her husband's customs by covering her daughter's head with a kanga. Mama also gives her a foul-smelling liquid to drink for protection against illness, during which everyone around prays to 'Enkai', their God. However, when no one is watching, Corinne discreetly tries to spit it out. In this way, she navigates her husband's traditions and rituals with a blend of determination and cleverness.

The Masai tribe have a high context culture since they are polychromic people, as for them, non-verbal communication is more important than verbal messages. In most of the western culture, eye contact is very important because it expresses confidence and social communication. The Masai have a high-power distance index; where men do not care about woman's rights, customs and their simple lifestyle, while the Swiss culture is a low context culture. There is no actual conversation between Corinne and Lketinga, and only some non-verbal communication takes place. Even so, Corinne falls deeply in love with 'her Masai' as she called Lketinga and she did the impossible to have a life with him, including adapt to a culture totally different from her. She even tries to follow their traditions by dancing along with the women in their marriage function. She lives her life as a proper housewife in her own 'manyatta' as part of their customs. Corinne experiences confusion, anxiety, homesickness, and anger when she discovers that Lketinga, her Masai husband, is jealous and suspects her of infidelity. As the novel progresses, she confronts the harsh realities of life in Africa. While seekers of romance and adventure might find rewards, the true strength of Hofmann's memoir lies in her ability to navigate the complexities of domestic life in the African bush as she learns to be Lketinga's wife—living in a humble dung hut and grappling with unfamiliar sexual and gender dynamics. However, her struggles are overshadowed by her husband's jealousy, revealing that his love is primarily rooted in physical desire. He even questions the legitimacy of their daughter's parentage, asking, "Corinne, why do all people know this child is not yours?" (298). Faced with the stark realities of marrying an illiterate African man, she longs to escape and return to Switzerland. Gradually, her dreams begin to unravel as she can no longer ignore their cultural differences, expressing, "I would have died in Kenya, and I don't think that's what you wanted. My family doesn't think ill of you; they still like you, but we are just too different" (301).

4. CONCLUSION

Transculturalism underscores the intricate transformations of culture that occur through processes of acculturation and deculturation, particularly in the context of migration and displacement. Acculturation involves the transition from one culture to another and the adoption of elements from the new culture, while deculturation represents the parallel process that leads to the loss or uprooting of one's original cultural identity. Transculturation, on the other hand, emphasizes the emergence of new cultural phenomena born from these interactions. In *The White Masai*, Corinne's attempts to adapt to her new environment and build a life with Lketinga reveal her struggles to embrace the identity of a Samburu woman. The stark differences between their cultures challenge her understanding of life, and the narrative, while centered on love, delves deeply into the complexities of cross-cultural marriages, cultural clashes, life in an African village, and the realities of domestic abuse. Through her journey, the themes of migration and displacement are poignantly illustrated, highlighting how cultural adaptation can reshape one's perspective and identity in profound ways.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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