



The Immigrant Burden: Navigating Xenophobia in Antoine Gnintedem's *Alien at Home*

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Abstract

There is no doubt that in a society where racial affinities and discrepancies are subtly reinforced by social interactions, migrants, particularly Africans, are prone to challenges of integration and acceptance. Coming from a background which is generally 'mediocre', 'less advanced' and 'inferior', these immigrants meet with a cold, prejudiced and often vile social atmosphere that threatens both their sense of self and place, making immigration a burden rather than the relief it was conceived to be. The acute discrimination, ridicule, rejection and hatred meted out to them pave a clear path to xenophobia. Antoine Gnintedem's *Alien at Home* (2022) is a shrewd reminder of the pain of migration of Africans to America - the battle with racial favouritism and the struggle for cultural integration - which unquestionably lead to identity complications. My main argument in this paper hinges on the fact that even to this day, African migrants still face challenges of a racial/xenophobic nature which they must manage to guarantee a measure of social integration. I therefore aim to lay bare, through Gnintedem's lens, ways through which these migrants experience xenophobia and how they can cautiously navigate race-related hatred to assume a confident sense of self and purpose in a hostile society.

Keywords: African Immigrant, Burden, Intercultural Understanding, Social/Cultural Integration, Xenophobia

Introduction

In a study carried out by Corra (2023) on immigration of Africans to the United States, he discloses that the last two decades have witnessed the largest flow of Africans to the US since the transatlantic slave trade. Moving to a society which has branded them inferior in every respect, and at the same time lured them with its promise of milk and honey on the streets, these migrants are far from imagining what awaits them there. While there, they are trapped in a multi-cultural and multi-racial setting with a dominant cultural

and racial group which suppresses the minority groups. In such a complex situation, they grapple with a sense of belonging, cultural adaptation and self-assertion. But more disturbing and traumatising is the anguish experienced from discrimination, racism, hostility, hatred and spite, as these migrants struggle to navigate the American space.

America, being a melting pot of cultures and races, is also prone to intricate inter-group dynamics as individuals from different cultural and racial horizons are obliged to interact with each other, creating significant incidents in social attitudes and behaviours in relation to others' backgrounds. This happens because in such a complex mix, people tend to classify themselves and others based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, language etc, leading them to build a sure sense of (un)belonging. Classifications of this nature pervade the American society wherein members of African descent (former slaves) were marginalised, discriminated against and hated even after slavery had been formally abolished, and even after they had proven their intellectual, political, and social worth. Race theories, particularly those of Hegel (1953) and de Gobineau (1915) are at the base of the continuous prejudice against African people.

The self-consciousness expressed by the Caucasian race is established on Hegel's (1953) perception of the dialectic relationship between self and other, which relationship involves recognition and interaction with the 'other'. According to him, recognition is quintessential for human freedom and the establishment of ethical and social relations, but it can also lead to struggles for dominance and authority. The Caucasian race adopted Hegel's (1953) concept of the other - an opposition to the self - to create hierarchical structures that favour them and exclude blacks.

Similarly, de Gobineau's (1915) theory of racial hierarchies, often referred to as "racialism" or "racial determinism," proliferated negative stereotypes about the black race, which served as justification for white supremacist ideals. By claiming that the negroid race is the lowest, brute, has animal character, narrow intellect, dull or even non-existent mental faculties with taste and smell beyond recognition, de Gobineau (1915) equipped the white race with an ascribed superiority - a poignant emotional weapon against blacks - that was vociferated over time. Together with Hegel's (1953) concept of 'other' (outsider), xenophobia came full scale. Both Hegel's (1953) and de Gobineau's (1915) historical and cultural stereotypes created prior to colonisation, continued to shape western culture's perception of other cultures as 'inferior', and consequently defined political and cultural policies along those lines.

In reaction to this, Saïd (1978) came up with the concept of "Orientalism," which is an exploration of the systems of knowledge and power (on which political and cultural policies and practices are based) used by the West to dominate the East and other non-western cultures. These, added to the historical and cultural stereotypes created prior to colonialism, continue to shape western cultures' conceptualisation of other cultures, thereby, providing a framework through which modern perceptions and representations of

West and non-West dichotomies can be understood. The generalised stereotypes about non-western cultures - "backward, degenerate, uncivilised and retarded" (Saïd, 1978, p. 207) polarise power dynamics thus deepening an "us" versus "them" mentality. The West is framed as superior while depicting other cultures as dangerous and irrational - delineating them as threats thus breeding xenophobic sentiments.

Xenophobia finds expression in the social identity theory which explores the influence of group membership processes and inter-group relations on individuals' self-esteem. Tajfel and Turner (1986) observe that people categorise themselves and are influenced by the groups they belong to. This categorisation leads people to discriminate against the out-group members, leading to a situation of dominant and subordinate groups where the subordinate group is considered lower and inferior and thus bears the brunt of oppression, marginalisation, social distance, and exclusion. Sometimes, it is not only about race/ethnic and/or cultural difference but also about power and perceived socio-economic danger. In such a situation, hostility can be directed even towards members who look the same if there is competition of some kind between them. In the American society, African migrants face subtle and sometimes violent aggression both from the dominant white group and from the slave descendants, who consider themselves as legitimate nationals of the country and thus are entitled to more socio-political belonging and power. For white Americans, black immigrants are just another group of cultural outsiders and a source of economic tension while for African-Americans, Africans are competitors for the limited resources available, and so constitute a potential threat. Africans, therefore, represent the 'other' who is feared and consequently prejudiced and scapegoated, leading to xenophobic attitudes towards them from both groups.

Social critics and organisations have written extensively on xenophobia and its effects on minority groups in America. Adding to the documented individual experiences of xenophobia against black immigrants particularly, Human Rights First (2023) reports on the stereotyping, criminalisation and dehumanisation of immigrants, highlighting portrayals of them as "inherently threatening," "violent criminals," "invaders" and "pawns in the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy." It further notes that these portrayals normalise xenophobia and anti-immigrant extremism thereby increasing hate in neighbourhoods and schools, and more particularly, promoting harmful policies at federal level. At the literary level, though there is an immense body of critical works on racism, particularly towards people of African descent, little attention has been paid to xenophobic impulses towards African migrants in America. Therefore, undertaking this investigation in Antoine Gnintedem's *Alien at Home* (2022) is an attempt to uncover the challenges African immigrants face in America. The novel explores how Africans in general and Cameroonians in particular feel alienated, marginalised and even rejected in their new society due to stigmatisation and long-standing hatred that propels xenophobia. It is from this backdrop that I intend to probe into the xenophobic impulses, which constitute the

burden of immigration, experienced by African migrants to America, and reveal how these migrants deal with stereotypes and prejudices to build new social spaces for mutual trust, understanding and peaceful co-existence.

Xenophobic Impulses and their Implications

Looking back at the caste system in organised ancient cultures, particularly the Greeks and the Romans, we would realise that xenophobia is as old as civilisation itself. In Greece, society was divided into the Hellenes (Greeks) and foreigners (barbarians), which went with natural attributes like cultural and intellectual superiority and freedom for the former and cultural inferiority and irrationality for the latter. In Rome, xenophobia took a more legal turn, offering full legal and political rights and privileges to citizens only. The Romans were suspicious of every foreign culture, fearing that their influences will corrupt traditional Roman values. Thus, they resorted to stereotyping and criticising other peoples, often referring to them as violent and deceitful (Isaac, 2006). This fact, reinforced by Aristotle's (1940) argument¹ that some people are natural slaves, justified the legal and social exclusion of foreigners in both Greece and Rome. Xenophobia, therefore, traces its roots to classical antiquity, which later influenced European racial ideologies, and as seen above, it is propelled by a natural human instinct of both fear and the zeal to control. Put in simple words, xenophobia is an instinct of self love and a fear of the dark, which fear stresses hate of the outsiders and is indistinguishable from racism (Ekwonna, 2019). As civilisations developed and met with other "strange" peoples and cultures, this fear intensified and became acute, extending into hate, hostility and rejection as we experience today between the dominant and other races in America.

As concerns the genesis of xenophobia in the American society, Porotsky (2021) traces it back to the history of slavery. She notes specifically that the Black American experience is an immigrant experience because of the forced immigration of Africans to America. Though America was built on the labour of these people, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson specifically professed anti-black sentiments. While Franklin opposed the importation of black people for fear that they would "darken" the American population, Jefferson espoused that blacks were inherently inferior to whites, a free black population was a threat, and peaceful co-existence was not possible. Separate residential areas was, therefore, according to him, the only way to contain the black population. Since then, the blacks have been considered a source of danger, and have thus been secluded, excluded,

¹ In Book I of *Politics*, Aristotle claims that some people are naturally suited to rule while others are to be ruled. He goes further to characterise a "natural slave" as one who lacks logical reasoning, cannot act independently but can understand when guided. Such a person benefits from being under a "master."

and placed under surveillance and control.

These caprices, which are discriminatory in nature, and are often exteriorised, have been at the core of xenophobic attitudes towards people of African descent in America, often culminating in violence and abuses of all types. This dehumanising and virulent practice was facilitated by the codification of slavery into legal and social structures back in the days. In effect, even after the abolition of slavery, racial inequality remained an unending legacy, shaping the social, cultural, political and economic relations between whites and blacks, and most especially, informing the prejudice and hatred that accompanied these relations. *Alien at Home* (2022) provides a bird's eye view of the situation, uncovering the misconceptions and biases that are exposed in the interactions between White/African-Americans and African migrants.

From Gnintedem's (2022) narrative, it is evident that America is still marked by xenophobia, even in the 21st century. This is noticed in the multiplication of violence, killings and general hostility, both physical and verbal, directed at African descendants. For Joey Jumessi Jr who has just arrived new from Cameroon with expectations of freedom, hope and a life of bliss, the acute disparity and conflict between blacks and whites in this perceived eldorado is shocking. Joey least expects "the blatant separation of a city into two distinct parts: one, mostly affluent, for the minority white citizens and the other tremendously impoverished, where the majority Black people lived" (Gnintedem, p.34). A city split into polar opposites creates a cycle of inequality with enormous implications. On first observation, it speaks to an unequal access to wealth (high paying jobs, property acquisition and business opportunities). On a closer look, the city's polarisation feeds racial resentment, fostering mistrust, stereotypes, and marginalisation of the black community. Going further, resentment and marginalisation are experienced by black kids of Indianola, who though are offered scholarships to study in the Indianola Academy, "don't last up to a semester, because of the racist practices of the adults and students there" (Gnintedem, p.34). Even during sporting and extracurricular events and competitions, Indianola Academy would prefer to travel to other towns rather than play with the black schools in the city. Therefore, from childhood, white kids are taught that racial difference equals social, cultural and economic inequality - a perpetuation of segregation and racist ideologies.

As Joey comes face to face with this reality, feelings of uncertainty, discomfort and confusion overtake him. His initial thrill of touring the city of Indianola turns into anxiety and fright as he ruminates within; "if Black Americans could be treated with so much cruelty and discriminated against so intentionally and intensely, I wonder what kind of treatment would be given to a black foreigner like me" (Gnintedem, p.35). There is no doubt, from what the city reveals to Joey, that anti-Blackness is systemic, thus, even black immigrants are already racialised and judged upon arrival. Joey's inner fear, as extrapolated from his thought, foretells xenophobia by way of prejudice, stereotyping and

exclusion that black migrants are exposed to. If systemic racism targets citizens, then foreigners, who do not have any claim of belonging, are more vulnerable. Joey's fears communicate the supposition that foreignness may be seen as an added marker of inferiority and thus liable to double marginalisation.

The narrative unfolds with Joey receiving unpleasant racialised strokes even on his first day of class. He reveals that as the first day progressed, students' questions increasingly became "ridiculous" and "outright discourteous" (Gnintedem, p.42) as some made "smacking, hooting, grunting, panting, growling and cooing vocalisations and shouting 'awawa,' buyaka buyaka buyaka,' African booty scratcher" (Gnintedem, p.42). These slurs are racial both in content and context as they reinforce the association of Africans with animals - the jungle, primitivity, and stagnant in body, mind and spirit. By extension, their humanity is questioned, thereby, justifying exclusion, violence and inequality. Recreating these sounds, tantamount to the target being placed in a permanent position of "other;" separating them from mainstream society and creating a hostile environment for them to participate in public life. When this happens, feelings of shame and humiliation are triggered in the victims further resulting in low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

Other racist and xenophobic words thrown at Joey include "Nigger," "you can't even speak English," "why don't you go back to the jungle where you come from?" (Gnintedem, p.13). Curiously, these utterances come from a White beggar who could not get money from Joey to buy breakfast. Such denigrating words coming from a socially and economically disadvantaged White simply portrays how deeply ingrained racism is in the American society. The understanding is that even economic disadvantage does not erode White supremacy. Like the other slurs, these invoke stereotypes while denying the identity and humanity of Joey. The fact of Joey being dismissed on the basis of his 'inability to speak English,' constructs him as an outsider and therefore an inferior being. English then stands not as a medium of communication but as a symbol of power, echoing at the same time intellectual deficiency for Joey. This is especially devastating for him who sees all his years of learning and training as an educator, brought down by someone who probably has not acquired half the education he has, but who nonetheless has power and privilege over him by virtue of his Whiteness.

Furthermore, the encounter between Joey and the Goldman family - the parents of his romantic interest, Emily, is deeply harmful and traumatic for him. Their first meeting at launch brought Joey to yet another facet of xenophobia. Whether by accident or by design, Mrs Goldman takes him for a waiter simply because he is black, and even when Emily corrects her assumption, she yells, "What! You did not tell us he is black" (Gnintedem, p.68). Mrs Goldman's surmisal that Joey is a waiter aligns with assumptive stereotypes that associate Blacks with servitude. And the narrator notes that "both parents had a stunned and disappointed look on their face" (Gnintedem, p.68), which look conveys

a strong belief in racial hierarchies and by implication, an enforcement of social boundaries. Friendship in such cases is therefore seen as undesirable, a downgrade of personality and even a violation of racial codes. Even when he is finally given a seat, he still has to endure such humiliating, disdainful and malicious questions as to whether “Africans are systematically screened for HIV before they are allowed into the United States” (Gnintedem, p.70). This statement concedes to the early belief that Africans were natural disease carriers thus agents of contamination. They are, therefore, not only stigmatized but also imaged as a source of health risk to the American society.

Gnintedem (2022) notes that racism and xenophobia from whites towards blacks is well documented and so should be anticipated. But to experience such from people who look like you (black); people with whom you share the same ancestry, who are marginalised, hated, spited and dehumanised as you are, is what many African immigrants are yet to come to terms with. As partners in desolation, that is, if they don't want to be termed brothers in gloom, one would expect these ‘brothers’ to empathise with one another, but African-Americans exhibit the most hostile and heinous attitudes towards African immigrants. When an African-American asks Fred, an immigrant, to “drop that click-click language and speak American” (Gnintedem, p.93), he is not just emphasising on the need for ‘proper’ communication but is also launching an attack on language, identity and belonging. Qualifying a language as “click-click” translates into its inability to convey meaning while at the same time framing its speaker as primitive, backward and culturally inferior. Here again, the English language is given a high social status as in the days of colonialism when African indigenous languages were considered absurd and peripheral while European languages occupied the centre stage. Once these stereotypes are established, speech then becomes a basis for marginalisation. In this case, only American style speaking is legitimised in public space. Language equality is thus denied, forcing the victims into linguistic assimilation.

With reference to identity, this statement draws a line between “us” (Americans) and “you” (immigrants/foreigners). Judging from a social identity representation standpoint, “us” and “you” do not only mirror difference - they point to a process of othering that is common with people and communities who exhibit fear and insecurity in the face of others. Othering simply implies un-belonging, but this statement implies much more than the fact of not belonging. It denies the immigrant the right to maintain their linguistic identity as they navigate the tensions of American society. While this in itself is taunting, it is filled with threats of cultural erasure as the immigrants must drop their natural accents and take up American speech mannerism to be accepted in society; thus, the command, “speak American!” Regrettably, this comes from an African-American who shares the same ancestry with Africans but who have given themselves to misconceptions about Africa and Africans. Traore (2003) studied the tensions and conflicts that characterise the relationship between students from these two groups and identifies

stereotypes as the main cause of violence and negative attributes/attitudes. For African-Americans, who have been culturally removed from Africa, Africans were less civilised. This fallacy not only inhibits a recognition and an appreciation of their common heritage but helps create a social distance between them.

The fact that this utterance is made by an African-American to an African immigrant renders the situation more complex as both have a shared history of racism, oppression and exclusion. In bypassing this fact, the speaker assumes the position of the authentic and/or legal outsider/insider while categorising the immigrant as the foreign other, thereby, creating hierarchies within black identity in America. What this reveals is intra-group xenophobia, otherwise referred to by Gnintedem as “intra-racial racism.” He notes with dismay that “the worst kind of racism is ‘intra-racial racism’ if there is any such term ... we Africans don’t expect that black Americans would treat us the same way that white racists and xenophobes do...” (Gnintedem, p.92). This statement carries the weight of betrayal and pain that comes from in-group discrimination. In as much as this resentment for African immigrants from African-Americans can be understood within the framework of the categorisations of black individuality (enslaved, free, native) during colonialism, it nonetheless is a reproduction of the very power structures they suffered. Fanon (1986) observes that the colonised subject may internalise the oppressor’s gaze and redirect it towards those who look similar but are marked as less lawful. Fred’s African-American colleague, who mocks his accent, is a victim of Fanon’s observation.

Beason (2023) uses Winsome Pendergrass’ experiences to show that African-Americans are even more hostile to African immigrants than white people are. Pendergrass says, with regret, that “the people who tell me to go back to my country the most is Black people - not white people.” She remembers vividly how one black woman out-rightly said, “I can’t wait till Trump runs them back home. Let them go back to their country.” Beason notes specifically that immigrants from the Caribbeans and Sub-Saharan Africa attest to being harshly treated by African-Americans, and as a result, this latter group avoids associating with that community. In the opinion of these African-Americans, these black newcomers take the opportunities they “fought long and hard to get.”

Like the blacks mentioned in Pendergrass’ story, Joey Jumessi faces the same ordeal as he reveals that “90% of the time, I’ve been told to go back to Africa, or that Africans are usurping Americans’ jobs has been by blacks that I worked with or taught or met at professional development sessions ...” (Gnintedem, p.92-93). He cites the case of his colleague, Ms. Washington, who does not hesitate to tell him that immigrants like him are not welcome because they are “coming over here and taking our jobs from us, making it hard for us to find work to feed our families” (Gnintedem, p.44). It is understood that African Americans have over the years been limited to low-paying and insecure jobs even in urban centers. In a study carried out by Wilson and Darity Jr (2022) on job security in America, they note that after 10 years of job growth, the black unemployment rate fell to a

historic low of 6.1% but was still twice as high as the white employment rate of 3%. This fact may account for the friction among the black subgroup with regards to employment. It is, therefore, not about Africans but about the discrimination and oppression that can be traced back to slavery. The resentment of African migrants by their African American brothers on the idea of "taking their jobs" is a social perception that emanates from racial, historical, economic and social discrepancies. Blaming immigrants and directing grievances of a xenophobic nature at them only reinforces in-group hierarchies and turns attention away from systemic/institutionalised inequality, which should be a collective fight for black people.

As would be expected, some African migrants distance themselves from African-American communities to escape such stigma and blame. But this creates more tension than it eases it; fuels mutual suspicion, historical/cultural misunderstanding, weakens pan-African solidarity, all these to the benefit of white dominant power. The repercussions of xenophobia on the immigrant are enormous, ranging from psychological effects (shame, trauma, silencing, self-doubt, low self-esteem) to individual identity and cultural denial. In Joey's case, he exhibits feelings of depression as the narrator notes:

The rejection by some and the repeated racist and xenophobic acts by others ... trigger self-doubt in his mind ... when the landlord rejected his quest to rent his house for no reason other than his race, he would get depressed and would beat himself up. (Gnintedem, p.103)

Clearly, racial violence is taking a toll on Joey's psyche, pushing him to see himself as the problem while structural violence and social rejection continue to manifest. By beating himself up, Joey is shifting the question from, *What is wrong with society?* to *What is wrong with me?*; suggesting that he is really deficient as he is labeled to be. As this feeling of inadequacy and failure increases, he is frightened by the thought that maybe "he had acquired what he had in America through the benevolence of someone" (Gnintedem, p.103). Here again, self-doubt is manifested, further supported by the intimation that his talents are fake and so his personal goals and achievements are undeserved. Usually, when an individual finds themselves in such a situation, their identity shifts from subject to object, and they not only slowly lose agency but begin to internalise external definitions and assessments of their individuality. That is why Joey wonders "if there were some credence to the racists' and xenophobes' claim that Blacks were inferior and Africans were usurpers of Americans' jobs respectively" (Gnintedem, p.103).

Thoughts like the above can only be provoked by pain and regret. It is, however, very dangerous for an immigrant to believe in xenophobic narratives because not only does it question his legitimacy and cultural authenticity in that society, it also justifies the dehumanisation and social exclusion they face, and weakens both self-dignity/confidence and moral resistance. But the overwhelming presence of xenophobic tendencies towards

Joey is spirit-breaking and psychologically damaging as he continues to be plagued with a sense of guilt at the thought of having “taken the jobs of unemployed, highly qualified and helpless Americans” (Gnintedem, p.103). It is not exaggerated to say that this thought is already evidence of harm in the form of distress, identity conflict and internalised shame. Over time, these feelings may perpetuate and become generational.

Joey’s experience of xenophobia is just one out of the many that immigrants before him witnessed. As those before him prepare his mind for what he should expect, Peter, another immigrant narrates a devastating event that happened to his younger brother. He was pulled out of his car and beaten mercilessly by a “group of guys ... flying American and confederate flags and bearing bumper stickers that promoted Neo-Nazi and xenophobic ideas” (Gnintedem, p.91) simply because he missed his way and drove into a white neighbourhood. A few weeks later, he succumbed to his injuries. One year down the line, Peter has not gotten over the trauma as he “was sobbing and trembling and throwing his hand in the air in resignation” (Gnintedem, p.91) as he narrates the ordeal. In as much as Peter’s reaction is triggered by painful memories of violence-associated xenophobia meted out on his brother, it is also a result of the fright, anxiety, and distress he feels for his own safety. Whatever the case, his reaction is linked to psychological trauma, which has devastating effects on his personality and identity particularly when he still has to live in the source of his pain.

When xenophobia is backed by power, violence against target groups becomes prevalent. The shooting of an unarmed 25-year old black boy, Ahmed Aubery, by three white men, exposes the black population to acute insecurity with its own psychological implications. The circumstance of killing is agonising, as well as the fact that the murderers walked freely until public protests and pressure forced their arrest. Joey links this prejudiced behaviour to the “election of a nationalist, xenophobic bigot as president” which “emboldened white race supremacists ... to come out of the shadows” (Gnintedem, p.214). In Aubery’s case, white supremacy gives xenophobia moral and social cover reason why the murderers are known but not apprehended instantly. Like for the rest of the black population, whose lives have become more or less disposable, this incident becomes a source of anxiety and fear for Joey, knowing that the system will not defend him if he falls victim to xenophobic attacks.

The foregoing discussion exposes xenophobia in the American society as a serious socio-political problem that creates fear, hatred, division, insecurity, identity instability, and widespread suffering among victims. Its instruments reside in racial stereotypes, physical and verbal violence, social exclusion and resentment, which culminate into trauma. Put together, these hamper social cohesion by preventing cooperation and mutual trust. However, as in any other situation of distress, victims and sympathisers look for ways through which its occurrence and effects can be reduced.

Pathways to Curbing Xenophobia

Since xenophobia is a persistent phenomenon in the American society from historical to contemporary times, primarily steeped in social, economic and political power structures, and shaping both intra and inter group relations, understanding it is primordial to every endeavour at lessening its intensity. As patterns of migration increase, the world has become increasingly multicultural with ethnic groups and individuals brought close together. This flux has triggered ideas of belonging, identity, social, economic and political security for people who find themselves in multicultural/multiracial contexts. There is, therefore, a pressing need for improved cross-cultural perspectives and a humanity that can harbour a harmonious environment. In Meier's (2007) opinion, this necessitates deep familiarity, emphatic atonement and genuine appreciation among individuals, prompting them to recognise and respect differences in customs, beliefs and values between cultures. In his novel, Gnintedem (2022) presents visionary steps that can help a harmonious co-existence by ardently advocating for a society founded upon principles of respect. He delicately crafts characters who respond to his view of what a multicultural /cross-cultural society should be. Mr and Mrs Flint express part of his vision for curbing xenophobia. Being of the oppressing group, and parents of Justin Flint, author of the slur "Go back to Africa!" in Dr Jumessi's first period, they try to erase the slur from the wall. Unfortunately, they do not succeed in erasing it since it is written in permanent marker, suggesting the desire for its perpetuation across time. Conversely, the attempt to efface it marks a step towards its eradication and added to this, is the couple's apology to Dr Jumessi, which apology is considered a powerful tool towards social cohesion. First, it signifies recognition of harm and acceptance of responsibility; second, it rejects the ideology behind the slur; and third, it is a conscious effort towards reconciliation and engagement to uphold social relations between individuals of different ethnic/racial groups. These do not only help in promoting racial accommodation but also serve in relieving the emotional burden of immigration.

In Emily, Gnintedem creates a character who understands the value of social cohesion. Despite being raised in a conservative white family, with deep-seated xenophobic tendencies, she does not subscribe to white supremacy by virtue of skin colour, race and accent. To show her profound disdain for such baseless prejudices, she acknowledges black enormous contributions in building Indianola and enriching white people, encouraging Joey to be proud of the labour of his ancestors. By the same token, she challenges her family's ingrained belief in race boundaries, using their own religion, Christianity, as a weapon. By its teachings, all men are equal, thus she reminds them that "as the proud christians and church elders that [they] ... are, [they] have to practice what the good book says" (Gnintedem, p.108), that is, equality of all. Readers are reminded of how Christianity doctrine was subverted and used to perpetuate slavery and justify racial

hierarchies. However, this same Christianity has been used by black activists like Martin Luther King Jr. for the fight against discriminatory practices the same way Emily is doing. She out-rightly tells her grandfather that he is “nothing but a racist disgusting pig” (Gnintedem, p.116) and adds that their open discrimination and preservation of a blind and antiquated heritage only disconnects them from an evolving world that celebrates diversity. This is soothing to both Joey and the readers as it gives courage and hope to withstand the pain of xenophobia.

Apart from confronting her parents on their xenophobic attitudes towards Joey, she moves to concrete action by teaching black underprivileged children. Her decision is a deliberate action to combat the racist structures implanted in her society. As the lone child of successful accountants, she would have chosen to do something more financially rewarding after college, but she chooses to address the exacerbated racism in her country through educating black children, cognisant of the fact that education is a powerful tool for promoting racial equality and justice. Her commitment to social justice is further displayed in her resolution to attend law school and become “a civil rights and immigration attorney to fight for the protection of the rights of victims of hate and xenophobia” (Gnintedem, p.119) - a resolution motivated by the discrimination and injustice inflicted on Joey and the black children from the white community. Emily’s decision holds a significant transformative potential given the power of the law both in strengthening and dismantling oppressive social structures. By actively challenging the prejudices prevalent in her own family and broader white community, she intends to make a substantial contribution to fostering cross-cultural awareness and societal harmony.

This hope begins to find fulfillment when she succeeds in bringing her parents to re-evaluate their beliefs and prejudices and move from bias to embrace as they change their attitude towards Joey, apologising for the harm they have caused him. Though Mrs Goldman acknowledges that “deep rooted racism is not going to be turned off like a light bulb” (Gnintedem, p.102), she nonetheless makes a commitment to appreciate and respect racial and cultural diversity as her own contribution to a peaceful coexistence. This cognitive shift in position does not only promote racial accommodation but also strengthens social relations while at the same time encouraging cultural exchange. Most importantly, it reshapes global identity, prompting individuals to see themselves as part of an interconnected world. Thus, with the creation of this new space of acceptance, respect and peace amid the challenges within her family, Emily projects extending it to the white community and the society at large.

Furthermore, the Goldmans’ journey towards embracing diversity and engaging in inter-cultural communication finds expression in their exploration of the culture and dance of the Bamilike people of Cameroon during the traditional marriage ceremony of their daughter, Emily, to Joey. They demonstrate an increasing level of inter-cultural sensitivity, moving beyond ethnocentric/racial perspectives to celebrate cultural differences. The

narrator notes that it was a beautiful sight to see Joey's mother "teaching Mr Goldman how to dance Coupé Décalé ... two white parents, who, just three years earlier were against their only daughter dating a Black man, were happily celebrating her engagement to that Black Guy" (Gnintedem, p.184). This move inclines towards the kind of social change, which according to Hassler, Ulug, Kappmeier, & Travaglino (2020), is borne out of the engagement of two conflicting groups to enhance intercultural understanding. Hassler et al's (2020) position is heightened by Bennett's (1998), which holds that incorporating diverse cultural elements results in a harmonious co-existence and a deep appreciation of multiple perspectives. Thus, by learning the Cameroonian Coupé Décalé dance, Mr Goldman is not just engaging with the culture that produces it; he is also stimulating his personal growth from division to union and from prejudice to appreciation and respect, thereby, understanding the excitement and value of strengthening bonds across cultures and humanity in general.

Concurrently, the biracial marriage between Joey and Emily stands as a powerful tool for bridging gaps and fostering inter-cultural bonds. Their relationship transcends geographical boundaries as well as defies social and cultural norms based on race prejudices and stereotypes. It then stands as a strong factor for the breakdown of racial divisions and the promotion of intercultural understanding. As the narrator notes, both families - the Goldmans and the Jumessis "settled on both a western style wedding and a traditional marriage ceremony as both would be in line with their values" (Gnintedem, p.195). This decision is important and significant because it permits both cultures, as well as their members, to be acknowledged and honoured. Generally, in biracial families, the customs and traditions of the different cultures involved are often shared and appreciated, making diversity exciting and interesting rather than menacing. As such, the belief that racial/ethnic groups should remain separate gives way to the view that people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds can actually understand each other and live in harmony.

Regardless of the profound xenophobic challenges Joey experiences as a black immigrant in America, he chooses to rise above these limitations and focus on personal and social growth rather than succumb to the cycle of hate. As an educator, Joey understands the strength of cognitive content in raising awareness of cross-cultural tolerance and peaceful coexistence. He thus adopts a proactive approach - introducing weekly assignments that centre around contemporary global events and encouraging students to engage in personal reflections, with specific consideration given to the linguistic context, and to African nations. This pedagogic effort purposefully fosters the development of empathy, curiosity and interest in diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. When students' intellectual horizons are expanded following Joey's formula, there is a high probability that their attitudes and perspectives will shift from preconceived notions to an inclusive outlook. This takes impetus from Heng's (2010) perspective that education goes beyond mere academic knowledge; it involves understanding values and attitudes that

promote responsibility, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. Education, as Joey conceives it, becomes a tool for social transformation that will help the learners address global challenges as they get close to other peoples and cultures.

Irrespective of this pedagogic effort at promoting global consciousness, Joey does not forget that his skin colour, ethnic/ racial and linguistic backgrounds are social barriers. But instead of focusing on these xenophobic attractions on his person, he develops emotional and psychological equilibrium to cope with the tensions within. While explaining the reason for his project on cross cultural awareness, he reminds the students that “if you were more aware of the people, cultures and languages of the world, you would be less likely to write something as hateful as what you wrote above your head on that wall” (Gnintedem, p.191). Though gently sarcastic, this statement points to two important things. First it acknowledges that lack of global awareness contributes to xenophobia thus the need for intercultural understanding. Second, responding to xenophobia in a calm and rational manner is more mature and constructive than retaliating with anger or an equal degree of hate. Therefore, redirecting the conversation towards an education that promotes inclusiveness and inter-racial awareness eases the conflict and minifies the burden.

To maintain his psychological stability, Joey does not hesitate to respond to racist provocations with an equal measure of sarcasm. When provoked by a peer who claims that “they didn’t want to catch any of the HIV and Ebola that y’all Africans bring over here,” Joey responds, “I see; I’ll make sure to continue keeping my distance in order not to infect anymore” (Gnintedem, p.125). In another instance, Emily’s grandfather, under pretext of protecting his family, prejudices Joey for using his granddaughter to secure his stay in the US. Joey retorts, “just so you know ...I have a work visa to stay in the United States, and it’s renewable Maybe your immigration lawyer friend can explain to you how that works” (Gnintedem, p.117). Joey’s wry response, in the first case, is an ironic resistance to the irrational, absurd and degrading stereotype. The second case holds a deeper sense of self-worth as it calmly and intelligently corrects the racist assumption that every African immigrant is illegal. Both responses provide Joey with psychological and moral self-protection and strength to stay confident and dignified when confronted with racist slurs. But more importantly, the responses condemn prejudice while at the same time encourage understanding and respect among people of different racial groups.

Added to Joey’s personal attempts is the power of shared experience in reducing the crushing effects of xenophobia. When people grapple with same difficulties, feelings of empathy, understanding and a strong connection is built between them. As Joey interacts with other Cameroonians who have been in the United States before him, he finds comfort in the realisation that he is not alone in his struggles and distress, “everyone of the dozens of Cameroonians had at least one personal experience with racism and xenophobia” (Gnintedem 91). He further attests, “although we come from different backgrounds ... our experience with hate is what we all shared, and it’s very therapeutic just talking about it

together ...” (95). Finding support in communal solidarity is essential when confronted with challenges as profound as racism and xenophobia. It is foundational to healing and helps victims overcome stress-related disorders while at the same time regulates social isolation that may cause trauma. The union of Cameroonians, mentioned in the text, thus offers a platform on which to openly express and share their sources of pain, which sharing is profoundly beneficial to their resisting abilities and psychological well-being. For Joey particularly, it enables him continue his journey with pride and self-confidence, being assured of the “we” feeling that is resilient, mutual and empowering, contrasted with the “I” perspective that is incapacitating and defeating.

Additionally, the presence of Mr Overton and his team within the narrative provides Joey with a hospitable friendship that helps strengthen him. By reassuring Joey of his team's unconditional support, - “we’re here to support you and we love you here at Bolton. My team and I will always defend you” (Gnintedem, p.193) - Mr Overton is projecting himself as a beacon of unity, respect and reverence for diversity. His assertion holds empathy, tolerance and an intense and genuine sense of understanding for individuals from other ethnic/racial backgrounds. In as much as his actions give Joey a new space of acceptance and a more positive social sphere, they also inspire others to develop a willingness to recognise and respect people who look different from them. Together with Andy and Josh, they demonstrate a remarkable capacity of open-mindedness, ignoring the prevalent discriminatory preconceptions against black people. Their unparalleled benevolence exceeds conventional expectations and stands out as a persuasive demonstration of intercultural empathy and acceptance. As Dovidio, Johnson, Gaertner, Pearson, Saguy, & Ashburn-Nardo (2010) infer, empathy is a form of mediator for social interactions and perceptions that promotes mutual understanding and cooperative behaviour, which in turn help to foster an atmosphere of harmony.

Dovidio et al’s (2010) acknowledgement of the positive role empathy plays in reducing conflict finds expression in Joey’s dream in which he and his family are being apprehended by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Instead of harming them as is the norm, the KKK members rather sought to help them fix their car breakdown; “we just saw that your truck had broken down ... so how can we help you guys get back on the road?” (Gnintedem, p.223). Ordinarily, it is unbelievable that members of the KKK will come to the aid of a half-black family. The emphatic behaviour demonstrated by the KKK in this dream communicates the desire for a departure from their customary animosity to an introspection, re-evaluation and reconsideration of their anti-black orientations. The flags they fly are also telling - the American flag represents shared identity and patriotism in diversity; the blue, white and red Trump banner signifies a political affiliation that transcends partisan divisions, while the confederate flag, though controversial and associated with a painful history, could signify the potential for reconciliation and understanding. In all, Joey’s dream is a longing for a racial-free society even when every

White action seems to work contrary to that expectation.

Referring to apartheid and xenophobia in South Africa, Neocosmos (2010), writes that the overcoming of xenophobia presupposes “the recovery of a prescriptive politics ... and the recovery of an active citizenship - which alone ... can make such a prescriptive politics possible” (Neocosmos p.115). He argues that the struggle against xenophobia is a political one which must be engaged by the citizens themselves. From his argument, there are no legal structures to curb xenophobia; the solution lies in the will of the people. It is against this backdrop that readers understand why Gnintedem creates some White characters who understand the socio-political benefits of racial accommodation and others who evolve from being xenophobes to becoming inclusivists; and black characters who respond to xenophobia subtly while patiently hoping for change.

Conclusion

By shaping negative attitudes, promoting stereotypes, legitimising prejudice and intensifying division, race theories, developed during slavery and colonialism, greatly contributed to xenophobia. *Alien at Home* reveals the incongruous social and psychological effects of xenophobia on people of African descent in the United States of America. Through the experiences of marginalised characters, Gnintedem exposes the hurt African immigrants endure through prejudice, discrimination, racial stereotypes/intolerance, verbal and physical abuse and social injustice, which engenders psychological suffering and renders immigration a burden instead of a boon. That notwithstanding, with education, subtle sarcasm, shared experience, empathy and inter-marriage, the effect of xenophobia can be lessened for African-Americans. By implication, Gnintedem’s story calls for the promotion of social justice, cultural inclusiveness, racial tolerance and the respect of human dignity. *Alien at Home* (2022), therefore, is an influential narrative for challenging xenophobia in the American society in particular, while opting for unity across racial and ethnic boundaries in general.

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