ISSN: 2581-8651
Vol-7, Issue-3, May-Jun 2025
https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/jhed.7.3.2
Peer-Reviewed Journal

Journal of Humanities and Education Development (JHED)

Asylum Seeking and Institutional Discrimination in Melatu Uche Okorie's *This Hostel Life*

Mahi. S

Received: 10 Apr 2025; Received in revised form: 05 May 2025; Accepted: 12 May 2025

Abstract— *During the Celtic Tiger (1990-2010), Ireland became a prominent destination for migrants and asylum seekers. The post Troubles economic boom also witnessed a dark phase when the Irish natives became intolerant towards other ethnic groups as they believed Ireland's pride, their quintessential homogenous culture, was threatened by the outsiders. The Citizenship Referendum of 2004 and other similar government initiatives lead to the politicization of refugee status and discrimination of asylum seekers. Melatu Uche Okorie's This Hostel Life (2018) throws light on the most inhumane of any such policies adopted by the Irish government, namely the Direct Provision Disposal (DPD) system. This paper will analyze and critically reflect on Okorie's treatment of the everyday life and the tacit layers of institutional marginalization that the asylum seekers experience at the DPD centers across Ireland.*

Keywords— ***direct provision disposal, asylum seekers, institutional racism, refugee literature***

Since its implementation in April 2000, the Direct Provision Disposal (DPD) system is managed by the government of Ireland for the social welfare of migrants seeking international protection. These DPD centres are various communal residences like repurposed former hotels, hostels, camps etc., that are often supervised by private bodies on behalf of the government, and are infamous for being overcrowded, for poor and unhygienic living conditions, for isolated locations resulting in limited socio-cultural integration and other injustices that invited the criticism from national international human rights activists, alike. Introduced as a temporary emergency solution for boarding asylum seekers while their applications were processed, it soon became a system for systematic incarceration of the refugees. Though, the White Paper to End Direct Provision was undertaken by the Irish government in February, 2021 as response to the international outcry, the policy only proved to re-establish the state's control by rearticulating a new system that morphed the practices of the existing system by limiting financial and spatial support to the applicants.

Melatu Uche Okorie's short story, *This Hostel Life* (2018), can rightly be justified as an 'authentic' representation of the undeniable lived experiences of the asylum seekers inhabiting various DPD centers across Ireland. Melatu herself was a resident at a DPD center for almost eight years, and her writing was a copping up mechanism against her precarious existence as an asylum seeker in Ireland. *This Hostel Life* deals with the plight of the asylum seekers in the direct provision disposal system of Ireland and unveils the multiple layers of socio-cultural prejudices that the asylum seekers, especially black African ethnicities face in contemporary Ireland. This essay will elaborate how Melatu's writing emerges as a powerful indictment against the 'othering' of the precarious migrant identity that is marginalized in the mainstream narratives. It delineates an immigrant's lived experience from a Nigerian point-of-view in a race conscious Irish society and is set in the backdrop of a direct provision disposal center. The story further emphasizes the physical and psychological challenges that an asylum seeker should go through at the hands of system that objectifies them through constant surveillance. The story also exposes Irelands' conscious and subconscious racial prejudice against refugees, especially black ethnic minorities.

At the very outset of her story, Melatu graphically illustrates the 'chaos' at a Direct Provision centre on a Monday morning when the asylum seekers are queuing up for their weekly ration. This symbolic act can be rightly interpreted as a political ploy by the writer to map and cement the feelings of powerlessness and frustration experienced by an asylum seeker who is denied any agency by a system that strips away their basic human rights. The narrator of the story, who is the mouthpiece of the writer, observes through her window to deliberate on the over-crowded centre and to reiterate "the place is also full" (Okorie 2018). In the usage

of the Nigerian-Pidgin English as the medium of communication between the women at the centre, and in the depiction of the crude realities of the DPD centre, Melatu's work is a modernist approach towards the hitherto prejudiced depiction of the African subjectivity by giving a voice to the otherwise voiceless asylum seekers. Her deconstructive standpoint is evident in the following description of Ngozi, a senior Nigerian immigrant and a tyrant figure among the women at the centre.

> "Ngozi voice match her size. She is a big woman and her voice is big and sound like man voice. She like to call everybody 'Crazy' and I have hear some Nigerias complain behind her back dat their name is not 'Crazy,' and their Mama is not call them 'Crazy' and dey will tell her dat the very next time she try to call them 'Crazy'. Me I don't mind that she call me 'Crazy', I must tell you. But you know all dis Nigerias, dey like to fight all the time." (Okorie 2018)

Opposed to the mainstream delineation of African subjectivity as the uncanny 'other', Okorie's description of Ngozi offers a 'towering' individuality. Ngozi is described as "big", have a "manly" voice and like to call everyone "crazy". Ngozi is vocal, doesn't shy away from calling others names and always stand up for what she justifies as right. She is not a 'silent' black refugee but a rather 'loud' character who is always vocal of her frustration, and thus becomes an idol for all the suppressed voices at the DPD center. On the contrary, the men in Melatu's work are "idle", are "silent" and are largely absent. The oppressive management of the state funded DPD system and the resultant paranoia among the residents is epitomised in the novel when Okorie's story ends with Ngozi demanding honey as it was excluded from her provision deliberately and her 'loud' voice being disregarded by the man at the ration counter. Okorie exhorts how being 'silent' is not the actual problem but being 'silenced' or ignored by the state is the real reason behind the precarious existence of an asylum seeker in Ireland. Melatu goes on to portray the true colours of the mandatory DPD (Direct Provision Disposal) system custom –made for the migrants who are seeking asylum in Ireland. In Melatu's opinion, the DPD is like a woman in an "abusive relationship". In this enforced dependency, she finds the nature of this abuse acutely "homogenous". This institutional "abuse" that an asylum seeker face at the hands of the Irish government is in the curtailing of the dispersal of basic amenities like food and toiletries.

> "In my last hostel, dey give you provision any day, but it's gonna be one month since you collect last. So if you get toilet paper today, it's gonna be one month before you get another. Dat is why me I happy when dey give me every week for here, but now, me I don feel happy again. Dis direct provision business is all the same, you see, because even if you collect provision for every week or you collect for every month, it is still somebody dat is give you the provision. Nothing is better than when you decide something for yourself." (Okorie 2018)

The anomaly in the DPD system is discernable in the above lines by the narrator Beverlee. Besides, the author employs the character of Mummy Dayo as her mouthpiece to shed light into the racist notions inside the centre. After seeing the new white guard at the centre, she scorns in a "sad voice",

> "'I speak to am. He from one of those fake *oyinbo* country. Meee, I don't really like all those people! They racist pass Irish!' She look for where the man is stand holing something for his hand and hiss… Those Moslems, me I suspect dem too much o. I no follow dem do anything.' 'Eastern Europeans dem all be fake *oyinbo*…'Irish people too dey cold. Whisper, whisper, all the time." (Okorie 2018)

This 'othering' of all the whites and non- blacks such as Muslims in the centre is due to Dayo's internalisation of racism and racial prejudice against black people. Further to address the monotony and stagnation in the hostels, Melatu structures the entire chapter progressing through the dialogues of women waiting up for their turn at the provision disposal counter. This approach results in a structural subversion when she employs *pidgin* as the conversational language. The entire chapter progresses through *pidgin* and thus challenges the mainstream depiction of African languages and dialects. Talking about her employment and politicisation of the language used, Melatu states in her "Author Note" to her book,

> "I told the story from the point of view of a Congolese woman for whom I created a language, a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English and some American slang words which she speaks in a strong Kinsala accent. The idea was born from my observation of how the different nationalities in the direct provision hostel were reconstructing language in order to communicate with one another. The Nigerian pidgin English (albeit with all kinds of variation) became one of the most commonly spoken, which is not surprising as Nigerians made up the highest number of residents." (Okorie 2018)

A sociolinguistic perspective of Melatu's work reveals that she has politically re-constructed the pidgin

English to reiterate the multilingual characteristic of the DPD centres across Ireland. Through her deliberate act of pidginisation, Melatu subverts the hegemony of English. The resultant 'new' language which is modern and has characteristics of all major dialects of English, is employed as the primary language of the entire story. Her deliberate attempt underlines the marginality of the speaker, yet, subverts this marginality too. According to Swigart, the mixing and usage of a vernacular language with a European language highlights the speaker as "educated" and he/she enjoys "relatively high socio-economic status". Furthermore, the speaker is indicted as someone who "values both their indigenous identity and their new international status"(179) Thus the pidginisation in the text elevates the writer's /narrator's socio-economic status.

As the immigrants are contained in a cloistered space and their only entertainment is watching television, the dialogues are centred on the various European and Irish programs telecasted. Melatu has weaved the African cultural custom of storytelling into her narrative. The importance of storytelling for nurturing female bonding and thereby building a 'community' cannot be overlooked. It is interesting to note the immigrants' leitmotif of storytelling are reality tv series like *Big Brother* and *Real Housewives* as those are the only programs running in the Irish channels. Many women cannot even perceive the programs in English and all of them interpret the episodes differently. This results in creating a comic element in the story. Concering the same, Melatu acknowledges in her "Author's Note" that "I loved the fact that I was writing things that my friends could read. Every movie I watched and every soap opera on television became a story prompt" (Okorie 2018). This proves that even her own enterprise of storytelling has sprung from the mundaneness of the hostel system.

In summation, Melatu's depiction of asylum seekers subvert the Irish stereotypical portrayal of the refugees and throws light into the tacit layers of persistent institutionalised racism and structural discrimination of a non-native. Melatu's work successfully emerges as a frame narrative on transcultural sensibilities and is the first 'black' experience from a black perspective published by *Skein Press*, aiming for an inclusive Irish publishing landscape by giving voice to "communities traditionally underrepresented" in Ireland (About). It should not be just read within the lens of 'marginality' or for its spatial marginality in the Irish literary scenario that the text is immensely critical of.

REFERENCES

[1] Okorie, Uche Melatu. *This Hostel Life*. E-Book ed., Virago, 2018.Kindle.

[2] Kline, Bejamin."The Changing Social Environment of Ireland: Immigration and the Issues of Politics, Economics, and Security in Modern Ireland". Mediterranean *Quarterly*, vol 15.no 4, 2004, pp186-202. Duke University Press. JSTOR.

[3] Skein Press. "About Us" https://skeinpress.com/about/

[4] O'Toole, Gráinne and Melatu Uche Okorie. "We as migrants are used to being spoken for, yet these are our experiences". *The Irish Times*, 31 July 2018.