Exploring repression of racial identity in *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*: biracial children in lone-parent families

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Abstract**:**

The bildungsroman novel *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* by Okechukwu Nzelu identifies Nnenna’s unstable identity due to several factors such as her not knowing the Igbo language and her biracialism which worsens the tensions with her mother, Joanie. She resolves this by exploring Nigerian culture, such as learning Igbo and Nigerian cuisine. Her father feels alienated because he was brought up in Nigeria which still held colonialist beliefs about England being superior. Her mother suffers from oppression in being a young white single mother and struggles to fit in. Nnenna slowly embraces her racial identity and becomes more confident in herself.

This article surveys the representation of single-parent families in the bildungsroman novel *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, by Okechukwu Nzelu and investigates the feelings of alienation and belonging in Nigerian identity. One way the protagonist, Nnenna, experiences alienation is through her inability to speak Igbo; therefore, she struggles to connect with her father’s culture, which creates an unstable identity. Her lack of exposure to her Nigerian heritage negatively impacts Nnenna as it strains her close relationship with her mother, Joanie and weakens her sense of belonging. Furthermore, Nnenna struggles with her biracialism because she feels like she does not fit in with either her Nigerian nor English heritage. For example, the quote ‘Igbo, the language she had hardly ever heard spoken’ [[1]](#footnote-1) shows that Nnenna feels inadequate because Joanie has not explored Nigerian culture with her. In addition to this, Maurice’s absence highlights the consequences of Postcolonialism. For example, the quote ‘There’s so much that you fits in with neither like, so much that you don’t trust’[[2]](#footnote-2)Suggests Maurice felt deceived by the false representation of England and longs to be back in Nigeria.

*The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* follows a conventional bildungsroman style because Nnenna is depicted as naïve and overcomes her anxieties once she has connected with her Nigerian roots. This allows Nnenna to gain closure surrounding her father’s identity and with not knowing Maurice; furthermore, she learns she is capable of discovering her heritage for herself. It can be argued that some of Nnenna’s insecurities stem from being unable to speak Igbo. The quote ‘Aww, you’re gonna get offended now, aren’t you?’[[3]](#footnote-3) suggests that Igbo is a sensitive topic for Nnenna because if she had been brought up by Maurice, she might have learnt it. However, as Nnenna grows in confidence and learns more about herself, she learns she can learn Igbo as she is already bilingual in French and English. For instance, when she goes to pay for the Igbo language course, the receptionist asks her the reason for learning Igbo, and she replies ‘I just… I just think it’s time,’[[4]](#footnote-4) which highlights how Nnenna has matured and overcome her previous anxieties. In addition to this, the quote “Don’t you ever want to learn *your* language?”[[5]](#footnote-5) which is taken from a conversation between Nnenna and her boyfriend, Dan, suggests that Nnenna learnt French to overcompensate learning Igbo. Suggesting at the time, Nnenna felt unable to identify with her Nigerian culture because she lacked understanding.

The passivity Nnenna shows can be associated with growing up to a lack of exposure to Maurice’s culture, which has reduced her confidence and limits her from transitioning into adulthood. Jonathan’s comment ‘I was surprised that she’d never showed this kind of curiosity before’[[6]](#footnote-6) highlights the importance of young people being aware of their history and culture. Also, young biracial adults can find a sense of security with the identification of their origins as ‘providing children a space to locate themselves in history makes them present as agents in the struggle of self-definition and cultural identity.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, this implies that the Igbo language enables Nnenna to connect with her heritage. Nnenna’s self-discipline to save “one hundred and eighty pounds”[[8]](#footnote-8) signifies the importance of self-discovery. Furthermore, it suggests that not only is the Igbo language, important to Nnenna but more significantly, it enables her to meet other biracial students. This allows Nnenna to grow confident in her ability as she learns she is not facing her struggles alone and that she can discover herself truly.

In the *Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney,* Joanie has a lack of engagement towards her daughter’s Nigerian background, which begins to create a divide in their relationship. Nnenna felt humiliated when she ‘realised with some sadness that she hardly recognised any’[[9]](#footnote-9) of the role models presented to her in one of her language classes, which suggests that the exposure to the Nigerian culture has widened her knowledge and her understanding; reducing guilt and anguish of feeling ignorant of her own culture, which would boost her self-confidence. Within the article ‘‘Black–White Biracial Students in American Schools: A Review of the Literature’, Review of Educational Research,’ Fernandes Rhina suggests that ‘white mothers cannot fully appreciate their children's experiences of racism due to their white privilege.”[[10]](#footnote-10) On the other hand, the quote ‘passers-by in the art gallery smiled on as a woman and her- daughter? Niece? Friend?”[[11]](#footnote-11) shows Joanie being criticised for having had an interracial relationship and undermines her role as a mother. This suggests Joanie is marginalised by society and experiences prejudice for being a young white single mother.

Similarly, by questioning whether Nnenna is Joanie’s ‘niece’[[12]](#footnote-12) suggests that they wrongly assume because of their different skin tones that they could not possibly be directly related. Society’s ignorance towards diversity leads to Joanie feeling inadequate as a mother and oblivious to the distress she has caused her daughter. For example, Nnenna chooses to keep the Igbo course a secret from her mother because she “knew that Joanie would prefer for Nnenna to leave the whole thing alone.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This makes Nnenna hesitant about embracing her Nigerian heritage as she is unable to communicate openly with her mother.

In this coming-of-age novel, Nnenna faces difficulties in discovering her selfhood as Joanie overlooks her Nigerian heritage. Furthermore, one reason Nnenna and her mother’s relationship becomes strained is due to Nnenna’s exclusion from Nigerian traditions. For example, the quote “How did her mother know about Nigerian food?” implies that this is the first time Joanie has embraced Nigerian cuisine. This suggests that Nnenna has not experienced many Nigerian traditions before. On the other hand, the quote ‘whenever I try to ask you something about him… about *Dad’[[14]](#footnote-14)* can be argued to show Nnenna’s racial struggles and resentment towards her mother’s failure of exposing her to Nigerian culture.

Furthermore, by putting ‘*Dad’* in italics, the reader can sense Nnenna’s bitterness towards her mother. In addition to this, Nnenna’s anxieties of her mother believing European culture is superior to others are heightened by her anxieties when speaking about Maurice because Nnenna associates him with herself. Joanie struggles to emphasise with Nnenna when she states ‘Well, it does matter that I’m black,’[[15]](#footnote-15) as she has not experienced racism. Nnenna learns that she and her mother are not as similar as she previously thought; she experiences ambivalence as she finds she does not completely identify with her mother.

Biracialism represses Nnenna’s identity as she is unsure which identity she identifies with the most. Othering is defined as “the perception or representation of a person or group of people as fundamentally alien from another”[[16]](#footnote-16). ‘Othering’[[17]](#footnote-17) is experienced by Nnenna because she fears she is not viewed equally by society. The quote ‘Maybe that retail assistant is only having a bad day; maybe she was not having a bad day until you came along,’[[18]](#footnote-18) suggests that Nnenna is continuously under threat of being marginalised. Prejudices towards Nnenna being biracial are shown throughout the novel and the quote ‘Yes, she’s half and half. You know’ [[19]](#footnote-19) imply that society and the people she comes into contact with focus on her racial background instead of associating her with the social and academic successes she has achieved. In addition to this, Nnenna struggles to realise the complexity of identity. She feels as though she needs to justify her preferred identity when in reality, her identity includes both her Nigerian and English culture. Likewise, the critic Rhea M. Perkins reflects on a biracial college student’s experience and states ‘if he is with his White friends, he is the Black kid and if he is with his Black friends, he is the White kid.’[[20]](#footnote-20) This can be associated with Nnenna’s experience in society because she feels like an outcast when she is with white friends and family and when at the Nigeria Centre. It is only when Nnenna begins to accept herself and allow herself to explore the Nigerian culture does her identity stabilise. By being surrounded by other biracial people Nnenna can resolve her identity crisis, and Rhina Fernandes suggests that ‘further investigation into the experiences of multiracial people could shed some light on race relations and effective ways to tackle racial integration.’[[21]](#footnote-21) This quote highlights that Nnenna’s experiences are not uncommon among multicultural people and that empowerment, acknowledgement and acceptance are effective ways to tackle racial integration.

Nnenna’s father, Maurice, was brought up in postcolonial conditions in Nigeria and was taught the colonialist ideology that better opportunities could be found in England. However, since living in England, Maurice has felt disengaged from society due to the oppression he faces. For example, the quote “We’re not supposed to say we hate it here. Immigrants; Nigerians. We are not supposed to say we hate it here.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Maurice’s statement suggests that he does not feel respected or supported in his current society and feels like he is losing his individuality. Furthermore, the quote suggests that Maurice had a high expectation of England providing new opportunities. In addition to this, the quote ‘my dad is angry with me because he knows I could make it here if I want to. But sometimes… I’m not sure I want to,’[[23]](#footnote-23) shows Maurice’s disconnection from England. Secondly, this suggests that Maurice’s romanticised version of England has left him with a feeling of failure.

Similarly, Maurice has spent most of his life thinking about gaining a better education and quality of life in England; yet deeply misses Nigeria while away. Maurice experiences the longing to be back in Nigeria but is burdened with guilt as his relationship with Joanie cannot convince him to stay in England. Joanie cannot emphasise with Maurice’s homesickness because England is all she knows. Joanie associates with his dislike of England with herself “But you don’t like me. Not anymore”[[24]](#footnote-24) and feels responsible for him choosing to leave. Maurice’s disconnection from England and Joanie is understandable because he feels that he does not belong there.

The purpose of this article is to represent how different generations struggle with racial identities. The *Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* follows the conventional coming of age style because Nnenna only matures once she has the confidence to explore and widen her knowledge in her Igbo-Nigerian culture and embraces being biracial. However, discovering identity continues into adulthood, as shown by Joanie and Maurice. Racial struggles are still experienced at any age, which emphasises that adulthood does not guarantee that you are completely integrated into society. Selfhood can only be discovered by learning about your culture and yourself.

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