

Challenging the Idea of Europe: Representations of Female Transnational Experiences in Chérissa Iradukunda's *Broken Object*

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Scholars use historical sources to explain how the idea of Europe has emerged in the past centuries; however, it is important to keep in mind that much of written history has been one-sided and biased. In his book *The Idea of Europe*, Shane Weller claims that the discourse around this concept concludes that "being European has, with very few exceptions, taken the form of a sense of superiority and entitlement" (15). This characterization is displayed both in policy-making and people's collective imagination, ultimately becoming naturalized in and

outside of Europe. As a result, transnational subjects¹ face discriminatory bureaucratic procedures and social marginalization, which complicate their resettlement process and threaten their feeling of 'homeness.'² As an alternative proposal, transnational literature offers representations and experiences different from those used to create the idea of Europe.³ To define transnational literature, I use Paul Jay's concept of "authors who have themselves experienced the kind of displacement and mobility characteristic of twentieth- and twenty first-century life under

¹ I use the term 'transnational subjects' as an umbrella term to avoid focusing on people's legal status and/or the reason for resettling.

² Homeness is a concept "developed by the phenomenologist Seamon (1979) through five themes: rootedness, appropriation, regeneration, at-easeness, and warmth" (qtd. in Mehta and Cox 6). These themes will be used throughout the analysis to assess belonging in this narrative.

³ As examples of the idea of Europe, Weller refers to the constructions conceived "[f]rom the ancient Greek myth of Europa to the European Economic Community's Declaration on European Identity (1973), followed two decades later by the creation of the European Union, the question of Europe and the European ..., with profound political, philosophical, social, and cultural implications" (1).

decolonization, globalization, and the proliferation of struggles related to nationalism around the globe" (52), and who write about their resettlement stories in their narratives.

The present analysis considers *Broken Object*, a life-writing transnational story written by Chérissa Iradukunda, as a text that challenges the discourse around the idea of Europe through the representations of 1) the broken and 2) the gazed upon transnational female subjects. Iradukunda's family was forced to leave her home country Burundi due to armed conflict. They moved to Tanzania and "[a]fter the war was over, they moved back, but nothing was the same. The war had destroyed everything, including humanity" (Iradukunda 1). Later, her family resettled in the Netherlands, the country where Iradukunda lives now. *Broken Object* is her first published book, an autofictional story developed through Mylene, one of the main characters. Mylene's story is told by Bella, a sick child who has a pronounced scar on her chest due to open-heart surgery. Bella is telling the story

to Josephine, a middle-aged Black woman whom Bella decides to befriend. Readers follow Mylene's experiences of resettlement in the Netherlands, where she does not feel at home. The concept of 'homeness' is closely connected to resettlement stories due to its probable loss in the process and the lack of safety that derives from it. 'Rootedness' is Seamon's first theme related to 'homeness,' and it refers to having a grounding point where home is the start and the end of activities (qtd. in Mehta and Cox 6). However, due to forced displacement, Mylene's transnational life lacks 'rootedness,' which complicates her resettlement process even further.

Although Europe and 'homeness' are indeed connected, the unique perspectives of those who have been displaced into this territory may challenge the prevailing idea of Europe. Weller associates the idea of Europe with the topic of European identity, culture and values due to "the very significant challenges faced by the European Union, on account of the global financial crisis in 2008, the refugee crisis that began in 2015,

The intersectionality of her race, age, ethnicity, and gender shows how she is discriminated against and abused due to her identity.

and, in 2020, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union" (8). These events have resulted in the pursuit of a more solid European identity since forces such as globalization and migration have threatened to blur more traditional definitions. Using the representations of the three main female characters in *Broken Object*,⁴ I intend to denounce what David Turton refers to as the "dehumanizing effect" (qtd. in Canaday 165), which anonymizes transnational subjects into faceless masses. By analyzing Iradukunda's unique story, I dispute this dehumanizing effect and instead bring forth a narrative that is shared (albeit with differing nuances) by many others. Even though Iradukunda does not represent all transnational subjects, her story offers readers first-hand experiences of a resettlement process in Europe and

allows for a widening of the public debate.

In terms of methodology, the present paper combines a close reading method with a thematic deductive analytic approach. I uncover patterns and details in the story through Olaf Zenker's dimensions of identity, which the author lists as "nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability and disability, and [...] linguistic phenomena" (3). I use these dimensions as categorical labels to classify references to identity in the story. Afterward, I add a thematic deductive analytic approach since "[d]eduction is the process that enables us to use theories to explain real-world events" (Rich et al. 22). I focus on two representations: 1) the broken and 2) the gazed upon transnational female subjects. Through an intersectional analysis,

⁴ Towards the end of the book, the reader realizes that the three main female characters: Bella, Mylene, and Josephine are the same person. For this reason, I refer to them as the 'protagonist(s)'. Most of the story is based on Mylene, but their experiences are interrelated.

which takes into consideration a wide spectrum of discriminations and privileges related to a person's identity, I show how the female transnational experiences in this story, especially those of Black women-characters, challenge the traditional idea of Europe.

Analysis: Representations of Female Transnational Experiences

The Broken Transnational Female Subject

Just like the title foreshadows, the metaphor of people, in general, and transnational subjects, more specifically, being broken objects is present throughout Iradukunda's narrative. At different moments throughout the book, the protagonist(s) and her friends refer to themselves as "indeed the broken object[s]" (382). It is not explicit what the characters mean by 'broken object,' but through Mylene's story, one can deduct that it is related to the absence of a feeling of 'homeness' in their life. An absent sense of belonging to the family or social settings results in a lack of safety as well. The 'warmth' and 'regeneration' referred to by Seamon as two of the themes of 'homeness,' are limited due to the absence of other people's friendliness and support, and the lack of a safe

space for Mylene to get her mental rest (qtd. in Mehta and Cox 6). However, this situation changes by the end of the story, and they encounter people willing to help and find a place to call home. This adjustment shows that the feeling of 'homeness' is prone to being lost during the resettlement process; nevertheless, it may be (re)gained afterward.

On top of Mylene's absence of 'homeness,' her relationships and life experiences heavily mark her resettlement process. Although Mylene and her mother have a complicated relationship, the loss of both her parents at a young age affects her greatly. In addition, she suffers bullying in high school, and finds it difficult to adapt to her new surroundings in the Netherlands due to the linguistic and cultural differences. She points out how she does not "know many people in this country, I can't speak their language. How am I supposed to make friends or trust someone?" (Iradukunda 41). She experiences a feeling of loneliness with no one to turn to. Moreover, the fact that in her culture "we mustn't show our weakness, we must stand firm and put on a show in our face. I moved to a foreign country where we should feel and show our emotions, it confused me" (248) and it alienates her even further. In

short, the sense of lack of belonging to her family and her surroundings, the loss of both parent figures, the difficult adaptation process during her resettlement, and different traumatic life experiences contribute to Mylene's constant feelings of being broken and insufficient.

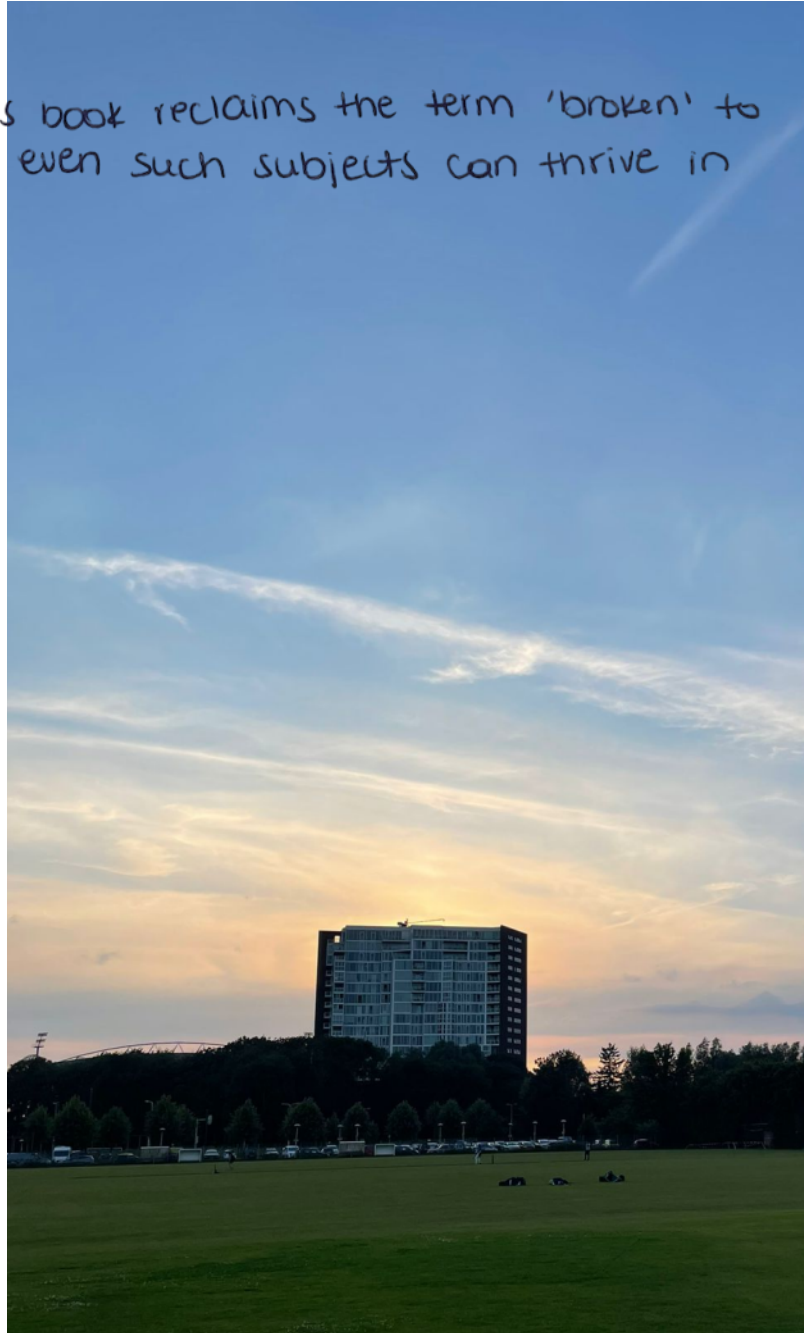
There is a clear intention by the author in selecting the word 'object' over 'subject.' The word 'subject'⁵ has different meanings, but the main difference in contrast to 'object' is that the 'subject' performs an action while the 'object' is acted upon. Interestingly, Iradukunda chooses the word 'object' to refer to those broken individuals in her story. In Mylene's case, she depends on the Dutch system, and in most of her recollections, she is a passive receiver of the actions of those around her. When both her parents pass away, "somehow the government

wants to send us back to where we came from, asking if we'd rather go back" (354). Mylene is interviewed incessantly until she is granted a stay in the country with her little brother is placed in a foster home. Once again, 'homeness' is threatened through 'appropriation.' This theme refers to the way an individual has control and power over the home space and a notion of privacy (Mehta and Cox 6). Mylene is told where to live with little to no options, affecting her 'appropriation' of a physical living space. Although Mylene has no control over the bureaucratic process and must remain passive, she is taking steps to improve her personal life through therapy. For this reason, in this analysis, she continues to be 'broken,' as she describes herself, but a broken subject, nonetheless.

Although the idea of Europe promises haven for its residents, not everyone is included in this promise. Mylene confirms that "[w]hen I was little, I heard so many things about Europe, sounds like a paradise to my ears; no pain, no war and above all a great life" (233); however, this idyllic

⁵ "[T]he person or thing that performs the action of a verb, or is joined to a description by a verb" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Iradukunda's book reclaims the term 'broken' to show how even such subjects can thrive in society



idea fades away when she encounters a different reality. Iradukunda explains the broken object metaphor on the back cover of her book:

I was looking for those pieces I had lost, trying to puzzle over where they belonged and where they should be. It felt like I was picking up pieces of broken glass: it cut me every time I picked up one of the pieces. In the end, though, I found a way to merge them with a little bit of gold.

When Josephine and Bella are getting to know each other, Josephine breaks her mother's vase, which is symbolic because of Mylene's relationship with her mother. The broken vase and Bella's willingness to "glue it together" (25) shows how the protagonist(s) are the ones responsible for putting back together the pieces of their lives that society, their mother, and others have broken. Josephine ponders: "I owe myself to be the best I can be" (385). This phrase shows the protagonist(s) reclaiming their agency and wellbeing. Bella tells Josephine a story about how "[i]n Japan, broken objects are often repaired with gold. The flaws are seen as a unique piece of the object's history, which adds to its beauty" (382), and their perception of what is broken starts to change. Being 'broken' does not

necessarily have a negative connotation. Iradukunda's book reclaims the term 'broken' to show how even such subjects can thrive in society. Mylene, Bella, and Josephine are part of those heterogeneous, contradictory and incoherent subjects (Harding 454) who challenge the status quo through their existence and unique transnational life experiences, which must be incorporated into the debates around our ideas of Europe.

The Gazed upon Transnational Female Subject

There are two major instances in which the gaze is noticeable in Iradukunda's story. First, when the female characters look at themselves in mirrors, a recurrent trope. Second, when the protagonist(s), mainly Mylene, are gazed upon by other people, generally men, placing them in an objectified position. Peters and Yue affirm that a mirror "displays the real world. It is not an 'as if', but an 'is'" (3). The protagonist(s) do not feel comfortable looking at themselves in the mirror. They are not comfortable with life as it is. Mylene sees all her broken parts when she looks at her reflection and at the same time, she sees nothing. She has "tried so hard to find [her]self

in the mirror, but all I can see, a blank and empty mirror, it hurts" (Iradukunda 333). She does not have a clear identity to hold onto. She feels isolated and hurt.

Due to the discomfort experienced by Mylene, Seamon's fourth theme on 'homeness,' which is 'at-easeness' (qtd. in Mehta and Cox 6), is threatened. Mylene tries her best to sustain a public image, and this prevents her from being herself. She is not at ease. She does not really know who she is or who she wants to be. Her only mission is to keep a mask on when she is with other people. Although she has romantic experiences with men that do not end well, her heart got truly broken when her mother tells her that she "wished [she] never brought her in this world" (Iradukunda 107). She becomes invisible, even to herself in the mirror. Mylene spends most of her life trying to understand how she fits in this world, especially in this new country. After a lot of emotional and psychological work, she "began to recognize another person standing in front of me who

needed my attention, especially to be cherished and to get to know better. The mirror showed me what I am" (370). She decides to take care of her neglected inner child, represented by Bella, who due to her open heart-surgery, literally has a broken heart.

Mylene is constantly complimented for her physical appearance. Unfortunately, she is also hypersexualized, especially by older men. Mylene tends to get romantically involved with men who are "[her] father's age" (238). Even though most of them express wanting to take care of her, in reality, they harass and stalk her, and they feel entitled to her and her body. The sexualization of racialized bodies is a topic discussed by feminist Black scholars. For instance, bell hooks writes that "the designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system" (52).⁶ As a result of this hypersexualization, Mylene trusts nobody and she does not feel safe. One of these men asks her to be his escort, and she inquires: "So, you think I can give you fire? Then

⁶ Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests that "Blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented. These sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women's sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, the madonnas from the whores" ("Mapping" 1271).

added, Because I am black woman or because I am young. Both, he replied" (Iradukunda 156). The intersectionality of her race, age, ethnicity, and gender shows how she is discriminated against and abused due to her identity. Although in the Netherlands she is not necessarily marginalized for being a woman, she is othered for being a Black woman. "Where I am from I don't have a right to my freedom, especially because I'm a woman, here once in a while because of my colour of skin but thank God there are some who see me" (Iradukunda 256). Here, the gaze is important. She is not perceived as an individual until someone else recognizes her existence. Mylene continues to be invisible until she is acknowledged by those who hold the gaze, in other words, those who hold the power of recognition.

In Mylene's story, those power and gaze holders are white people, in general, and males, specifically. Race is crucial to this analysis because Mylene questions how people treat her due to the color of her skin. There are instances in which the protagonist(s) face racist

behavior. For example, Mylene is told by some classmates in her high school that Black people smell (42), the grandparents of her first boyfriend, Michael, disapprove of her for being a Black immigrant (98), teachers are disappointed when she receives good grades (333). These experiences show that for some transnational subjects their participation in society is contingent upon their skin color and ethnicity. However, the discrimination does not only come from white individuals. Mylene remarks:

Today I met a group of girls from Suriname. Apparently, I had a dirty African girl smell to them [...] I looked at them, they were the same colour as me, I wonder why they always say we are different. "We are black, but we are better than Africans" [...] it feels lonely when our own colour people dislike you.
(338)

This passage shows the existence of an implicit hierarchy of races and ethnicities⁷ that is rooted in people's collective imaginary. The idea of Europe also sustains this hierarchy through "European colonialism grounded in the

⁷ "Although most societies no longer defend systematic theories based on an allegedly objective hierarchy of 'races,' a sense of division remains between many ethnic groups, especially towards foreigners of different phenotypes" (Freier et al. 143).

notion of the superiority of European humanity over the non-European 'inferior races,' particularly in Africa and the Americas" (Weller 4). In this case, those who believe in "ethnic purity" (Weller 4) hold the gaze over those who are considered "inferior" and decide what is best for them.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the broken and the gazed upon transnational female subjects in *Broken Object*, I have accomplished two outcomes. First, I have challenged the idea of Europe which results in a "Eurocentric, Euro-supremacist, and Euro-universalizing [discourse] in nature" (Weller 5). Secondly, I have used Seamon's themes of 'homeness' to uncover how for some transnational subjects neither the place of birth nor the place of resettlement offers a feeling of belonging and safety. In this sense, Mylene reminds herself that "even the country I suppose to call home I never really feel at home or welcome" (Irudukunda 298). The European experience is lived differently by individuals, especially by transnational subjects. Because the idea of Europe was created and reinforced by those who held a

privileged position, it does not take into consideration people who have been historically marginalized. For Mylene, resettling in Europe was meant to improve her life and "be different [...] but I think I was wrong" (Irudukunda 41). The idea of Europe has impacted history and modern society, and it must be approached from a critical point of view. Weller invites us to acknowledge those not so positive contributions and argues that only by understanding "their intimate relation to that which is worth saving in the idea of Europe, can we begin to adumbrate the idea of another Europe, one no longer set in aggressive or hierarchical relation to that which lies beyond it" (15). Although this move towards a more inclusive idea is already taking place, it is not an easy task to accomplish.

The female transnational representations in Irudukunda's autobiography remind us why this transformation is important. This unique transnational narrative questions the old representations that have been "characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior" (Said 95). In Irudukunda's story, broken subjects may thrive in society and gazed upon subjects can reclaim their agency and well-being.

As a result, transnational subjects face discriminatory bureaucratic procedures and social marginalization, which complicate their resettlement process and threaten their feeling of 'homeness'.

Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the societal obstacles imposed on transnational Black women. The different intersections in the female characters' identities hinder their resettlement process and their feeling of 'homeness.' 'Homeness' should be a right for everyone regardless of their self-identification. Throughout the story, its absence negatively affects the protagonist(s)' lives.

However, the story ends on a more positive note as the protagonist(s) meet, and this coming together represents a healing journey in their resettlement process. The future looks brighter since they understand that they may belong to two (or more) places at once. "When I look in the mirror, I see confused person with pride, trapped in two different worlds" (Iradukunda 14). Transnational subjects may benefit from a fluid

identity that is not demarcated by traditional standards. Cherrie Moraga praises this fluid identity as she writes: "I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently" (29). It is up to individuals to identify where they belong to and where they come from and how they glue broken pieces with a little bit of gold.

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