

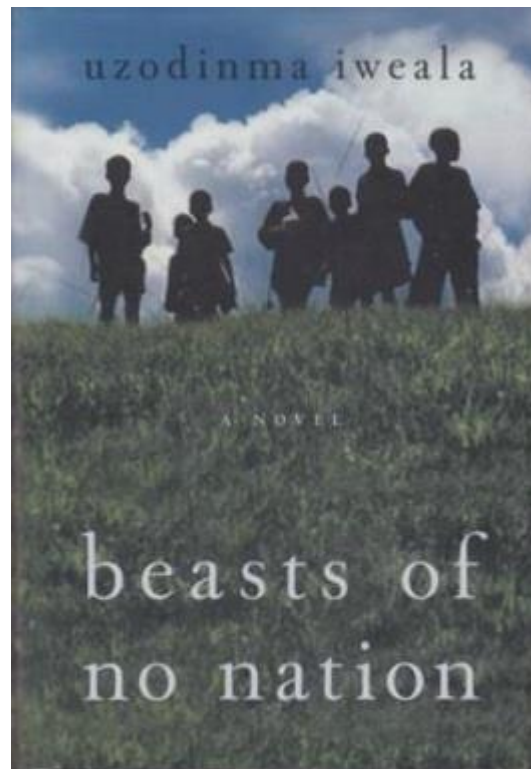
Chris Abani's *Graceland* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*: Representation of Individual and the Nation

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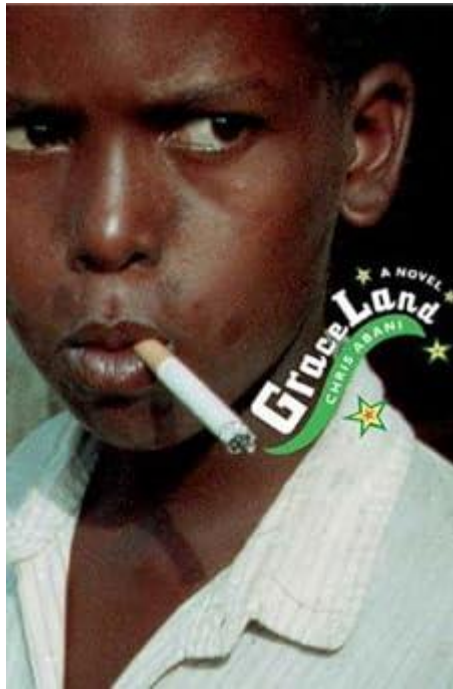


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Abstract

Chris Abani and Uzodinma Iweala are notable writers in contemporary Nigerian literature. The research paper examines the themes from "Graceland" by Chris Abani and

Beasts of No Nation by Uzodinmo Iweala. This critical study uses the comparative analysis method to reveal common themes, such as the effects of social and political change on individuals that ultimately result in the loss of innocence and the transition to adulthood. Exploring themes of instability, social and political, immorality, relationships, and coming of age, along with identity and belonging, highlights how characters channel a complex sense of self in stimulating settings.



Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Chris Abani

Chris Abani, a world-renowned author, and scholar was born in Afikpo, Nigeria. He received his bachelor's degree in English from IMO State University and his master's degree from the University of London. Abani went on to pursue his doctorate in literature and creative writing from the University of Southern California, where he made significant contributions to modern Nigerian literature. Throughout his career, Abani has been honoured with numerous awards, including the California Book Award for his work "The Secret History of Las Vegas" and the Penn Hemingway Book Award for "Graceland". Abani's writing often explores themes of social discrimination, individual freedom, narrative complexity, and instability without compromise.

Graceland

Graceland provides insight into the challenges faced by people in troubled countries, like Elvis, who struggle and succeed in improving their lives. The study "Surplus City: Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning, and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *Graceland*" by Ashley Dawson highlights "*Graceland*" as a postcolonial exploration of urban society, reflecting tensions between elite and popular perspectives on development within a fictional mega-city.

The article 'Peripheral Violence in *Graceland*' by Annalisa Oboe and Elisa Bordin explores socioeconomic and cultural violence in Chris Abani's novel' the main character, Elvis Oke, shows resilience in confronting challenges in the Maroko slum despite pervasive violence. Elvis aims to assert aesthetic and intellectual agency, resisting confined conditions in a world shaped by neocolonialism and neo-capitalism.

Uzodinma Iweala

Uzodinma Iweala is an award-winning Nigerian American author, physician, and filmmaker. He was born on November 5, 1982, and has made significant contributions in various fields, from literature to medicine. A highlight of his work is his debut novel, *Beasts of No Nation*, which reflects his commitment to addressing critical social issues, raising awareness, and promoting understanding. His diverse background and impressive accomplishments have led him to play an essential role in literature and global health.

Beasts Of No Nation

Beasts of No Nation is about how war harms young people, dehumanizes them, and robs them of their innocence. This thought-provoking book shows the harsh effects of war on children.

The study "Wars as Postcolonial African Illness in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*" by Oman Osiki, Sola Owonibi and Oluyinka Ojedokun examines the ongoing problem of wars in Africa, especially in the postcolonial era. It highlights the psychological impact on children and the geopolitical challenge posed by war in Africa's path to nationhood.

The study 'Chris Abani's *Graceland* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation: Nonstandard English, Intertextuality and Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy*' by Iain Lambert compares "Graceland" and "Beasts of No Nation" in terms of their use of nonstandard English and intertextuality. The novels offer unique perspectives on Nigerian English in diasporic literature.

Insights Into Chris Abani's *Graceland*

Graceland is a fascinating literary work of Nigeria's culture. In a country where political chaos and cultural diversity exist, the story follows the life of a young boy called Elvis who's pretending to be Presley in Lagos. Abani skillfully interconnects themes of identity, familial connections, and the struggle for existence in a nation grappling with corruption and societal challenges. A captivating insight into the indomitable spirit of people is provided in this book by examination of their ambitions under a turbulent environment.

Political Instability: The contemporary work depicts a diverse range of themes that shed light on the complex tapestry of both Nigerian society and the broader human experience. A primary theme within the narrative is the depiction of Nigeria's political instability and widespread corruption during the 1980s. The story unfolds amidst political coups, military rule, and oppressive governance, with characters navigating the profound repercussions of political decisions on everyday citizens. The quote 'It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.' [...] That was the perfect description of life in Lagos, he thought. Gives the illustration of Political Instability.

Self-discovery: Another prominent theme explored is the quest for identity and self-discovery. The central character, Elvis Oke, begins a poignant journey to reconcile his Nigerian heritage with his upbringing in America. This struggle for a sense of belonging is not confined to Elvis alone; various characters grapple with questions of nationality, ethnicity, and their place in a society undergoing transformative change. The theme of Self-discovery is evident from the quote: "What I've come to learn is that the world is never saved in grand messianic gestures but in the simple accumulation of gentle, soft, almost invisible acts of compassion."

Relationships: Abani artfully weaves the theme of family and relationships throughout the narrative. Elvis's interactions with his father, stepmother, and peers reveal complex familial dynamics, echoing the broader tensions present in Nigerian society. The novel effectively examines conventional and unconventional familial bonds, illustrating how these relationships influence personal experiences. The depiction of the Relationship between Elvis and his Father can be seen in the following quote: “He knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body. And yet beyond that, he was that scar carved by hate, smallness, and fear onto the world's face. He and everyone like him, until the earth was aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire.”

Socioeconomic Disparities: Socioeconomic disparities are vividly portrayed, underscoring the stark divide between Nigeria's affluent elite and its struggling masses. The narrative highlights the striking contrast between Elvis's privileged life in America and the profound hardship he encounters upon returning to Nigeria. This theme is a lens through which readers comprehend the societal imbalances influencing characters' choices and trajectories. The following piece of conversation between Elvis and Redemption gives the clue about socio-economic disparity: - “Elvis, take de passport. You know I myself no go ever go America,' Redemption said.

'Why?'

'Because dis na my home. I be area boy, alaye. I no go fit for States.”

Post-colonialism: Abani also delves into the aftermath of colonialism and its implications for cultural identity. Traditional belief systems intersect with Western influences, leading to tensions and a search for authenticity. This exploration of cultural heritage underscores how historical legacies and traditions continue to shape contemporary viewpoints.

The Crucible of Transformation: The novel follows Elvis's transformative journey from adolescence to adulthood, capturing the countless challenges and uncertainties that accompany this transitional phase. His experiences become a conduit through which the broader theme of coming of age is explored, as he navigates personal losses and confronts the harsh realities of the world around him.

Violence: A notable theme intertwined within the narrative is violence and trauma, portraying the enduring impact of conflict on both individuals and society. Characters are exposed to various forms of violence, prompting an examination of their coping mechanisms and how these traumatic encounters mould their identities. This portrayal of violence underscores its cyclical nature and its capacity to reverberate through generations. Violence can be seen through the conversation between Colonel and Elvis in the following excerpt: “Dis your friend is a lucky man. The Colonel has killed people for this kind of disrespect,” Jimoh said. “But I did nothing,” Elvis protested. Redemption and the soldiers laughed. “Dis your friend is a hothead. He did not learn his lesson, I see,” Jimoh said. “What lesson?” Elvis asked. “Dat dere is no right or wrong with soldier. Just what we want,” Jimoh replied

Analysis of Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*

Beasts of No Nation is a work about children forced to be soldiers in a country where war occurs frequently. The story is set in a war-prone region in Africa. Agu, the protagonist and the central character of the literary work is terrified when his hometown is attacked. Other men lead Agu to lose his innocence and get him involved in misconduct.

The work engages with various themes that illustrate the utter truths of conflict and the unyielding human capacity for survival. The novel centres on the distressing theme of child soldiering and exploitation, chronicling Agu's involuntary enlistment into a rebel army during an unidentified West African civil war. Through Agu's narrative, the work exposes the grim reality of children being bullied, brainwashed, and manipulated into becoming agents of violence in conflicts that lie beyond their conception.

Loss of Innocence: The work deals with the profound loss of innocence. This theme resonates throughout as Agu and his fellow child soldiers are thrust into a world of brutality and savagery far removed from their earlier innocence. Their harrowing experiences shatter their innocence and irreparably reshape their understanding of the world. This distressing loss of innocence serves as a recurring motif, symbolic of the disastrous toll of war on childhood. The following excerpt illustrates the loss of innocence: “Because I am tall more than him, I know that I am older, but nobody is really telling how old they are anymore. All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not.”

Violence: At its core, the work deals with the theme of violence and its outcome. The pages of the novel bear vivid depictions of the cruelty Agu witnesses and participates in, starkly underscoring the traumatic scars etched on his psyche. This theme delves deep into the lasting psychological wounds that conflict inflicts, echoing far beyond the immediate theatre of war. The novel, in many ways, serves as a testament to the permanent imprint of violence on individuals and societies.

Dominion Through Manipulation: Power dynamics and control play a crucial role in the narrative's exploration. Commanders within the rebel faction assert dominion through manipulation and intimidation, fostering an environment of steady compliance among the child soldiers. This theme affectingly illustrates the manipulation of power to exploit the vulnerable, propagating cycles of oppression and violence.

Resilience: Amid the bleakness, the theme of resilience and survival emerges as a directing thread. Agu and his compatriots adapt to their nightmarish existence, showcasing the innate human ability to endure and prevail in the terrible circumstances. This resilience serves as a testament to the human's ability to continue even in the face of challenging odds. The theme of Resilience can be understood through the quote: "I am waiting outside in the darkness making myself ready for when I go in. So, I am thinking as many good things I can think because if you are thinking good thing, nothing bad is happening to you."

Loss and Grief: Loss and grief also occupy a central thematic space. Agu grapples with the death of loved ones and the extinction of his community, serving as an example of the broader losses experienced by war-ravaged nations. These personal losses echo the collective mourning that conflict imposes on societies, underscoring the far-reaching effects of war. The lines below give an idea about the theme of loss and grief: "I was feeling like somebody is coming to take everything that I like and just make me to sad."

Identity and Belonging: The theme of identity and belonging takes on an insightful significance as Agu navigates life as a child soldier. Struggling with loyalties, blurred moral boundaries, and a broken sense of self, Agu's trajectory embodies the identity crises that

conflict thrusts upon individuals. His interactions with fellow child soldiers and the factional divisions within the rebel group further highlight this theme.

The following excerpt illustrates the theme of identity and belonging: “so we were playing all this game then and thinking that to be a soldier was to be the best thing in the world because gun is looking so powerful and the men in movie are looking so powerful and strong when they are killing people, but I am knowing now that to be a soldier is only to be weak and not strong, and to have no food to eat and not to eat whatever you want, and also to have people making you do thing that you are not wanting to do and not to be doing whatever you are wanting which is what they are doing in movie. But I am only knowing this now because I am soldier now.”

The Dehumanizing Impact of War: Dehumanization and desensitization are also intertwined into Agu's transformation. His gradual acceptance of violence as a survival mechanism and his detachment from his own emotions mirror the dehumanizing impact of war, illuminating how individuals can become desensitized to suffering in order to sustain. The theme of Dehumanizing Impact of war can be evident through the following quote: “I am fearing because I am seeing that the only way not to be fighting is to die. I am not wanting to die.”

To Conclude

Graceland and *Beasts of No Nation* highlight how literature can reveal both common and unique aspects of the human experience amid challenges. They share similar themes that shed light on the deep effects of political turmoil and conflict on people. Researchers including Ashley Dawson, Annalisa Oboe and Elisa Bordin, Oman Osiki, Sola Owonibi and Oluyinka Ojedokun in their study confirm the themes including the dehumanizing effects of war, power dynamics, ethical dilemmas in rebel groups, and broader societal consequences. Both works explore transformative journeys during tumultuous teenage years in societies ravaged by unrest. These two literary works provide poignant insights into the lasting impacts of political upheaval on individuals and society.

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