

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

Reconstructing Identity and Memory in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*

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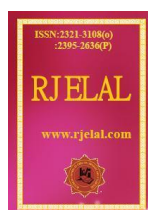
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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.3.212](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.3.212)



Article info

Article Received: 20/07/2026
Article Accepted: 19/08/2026
Published online: 23/08/2026

Abstract

The book *Every Day Is for the Thief* by Teju Cole deals with such matters as identity and memory in connection with revisiting contemporary Lagos. This book narrates the story of the Nigerian American protagonist revisiting his native land and reflecting on all the things that he knew before in the light of new experience. Personal memory gains its importance due to the fact that Lagos, which exists in the memories of the protagonist, constantly interacts with the real Lagos of the return journey of the narrator. Such an interaction shows how migration leads to complex relations between homeland, belonging, dislocation, and individual identity. The paper analyzes how the identity of the narrator is reconstituted through memories, encounters, observations, pictures, and reflections on Nigerian life. For the narrator, Lagos acts as the place of a homeland and changeable urban environment that questions the concept of belonging. As per the findings of this research, identity will keep on being fluid as memory changes our perspectives towards place, history, culture, and identity. This indicates that the return process is not only one that involves thought but also feeling which is a recognition, distance, negotiation and cultural process.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Migration, Belonging, Displacement, Postcolonial Literature; African Literature.

INTRODUCTION

Migration, displacement, memories, cultural negotiation, and homecoming are

common themes explored in the modern African literature when it comes to issues of identity. According to Kiguru, Fyfe, and

Krishnan, "contemporary African literary discourses" have become increasingly preoccupied with "transnational cultural experiences and mobility of African identities" in terms of geography and culture (Kiguru, Fyfe, and Krishnan 189-212). The above experiences question the idea of permanency of identity tied to one geographical site since migration leads to a physical distancing from the homeland while memories keep the connection to the past place alive. Similarly, Samuel studies the issue of return as an important postcolonial experience where migrants negotiate their memory of the homeland and reality. Return is complicated due to the fact that immigrants are confronted not only with the image of their homeland in memories but also with the changed homeland. The concept of complexity is present in the book titled *Every Day Is for the Thief*, written by Teju Cole. In this story, an unnamed Nigerian narrator travels back to Lagos from his long stay in New York. According to the description given by the author of the book, the unnamed narrator is a young Nigerian who travels to Lagos from New York (Cole). Contradiction shown above is the main one in the story since the narrator feels that his native town becomes foreign for him because of his own experience. Li describes the narrator as a "motorized returnee" and claims that movements of the narrator in the city change his attitude to it (Li 46-60).

Memory thus comes into focus insofar as the narrator constantly draws comparisons between the Lagos of his memory and the current Lagos city. According to Mueller, *Every Day Is for the Thief* focuses on the relations between Lagos, space and memory by the attempts of the narrator to retrieve his lost memories of childhood (Mueller 316-330). Lagos thus acts as a memory archive. In addition, Thacker's analysis shows how the observations made by the narrator stem from a very unstable relationship among place, modernity and memory (Thacker 78-99). Lagos cannot be retrieved in its totality since there have been changes to the social and cultural

aspects as well as space of Lagos during the narrator's absence. That is why the narrator needs to balance between Lagos in his memory and the Lagos in present. This fragmentary structure is therefore a reflection of his effort to reconstruct a city that exists at the same time in memory and in the present (Cole). In this essay, I try to show that *Every Day Is for the Thief* portrays identity as a dynamic construction influenced by memory, migration, displacement, cultural experience and perception of home. My paper discusses the narrator's return, reconstruction of home through memory, the position of insider/outsider, and the importance of language, culture and narrative fragmentation.

Literature Review

Every Day is for the Thief by Teju Cole has received critical attention because of its discussion of various questions related to migration, coming home, Lagos, memory, and transnationality. Hallemeier analyzes *Every Day is for the Thief* from the perspective of literary cosmopolitanism and examines the way in which the worldwide mobility leads to conflicts in the relationship between belonging and internationality (Hallemeier 239-250). The findings indicate that the narrator has the cultural knowledge about Nigeria but at the same time he knows Lagos as someone who spent his life abroad. Lemke analyzes *Every Day is for the Thief* from the perspective of precarious transnationalism and pays particular attention to the way in which the narrator is situated in-between Nigeria and the USA (Lemke 76-88). The analysis confirms that coming home does not always presuppose the recovery of belongingness. Rodríguez similarly discusses the homecoming and portrays the narrator as a cosmopolitan stranger in his homeland (Rodríguez 789-802). Rippl looks at Cole's utilization of images and texts in his representation of Lagos (Rippl 472-484). This research shows that the city not only acquires physical space but becomes a cultural space through observation and memory. Mueller

gives an interesting study on spatial memory in Cole's representations of Lagos and New York (Mueller 316-330). The researcher reveals that places can trigger childhood memories and affect the narrator's perceptions of his identity in the past. Li gives a study on the "motorized returnee" and demonstrates that his movement through Lagos creates new perceptions about home (Li 46-60). The study proves that reticence is gradual and not an immediate process of return. Soto examines reticence, omission, forgetting and recovery in Cole's fiction (Soto 368-386).

The analysis of Tinson reveals modernity, struggle and solidarity in Cole's literature (Tinson 387-407). The research suggests that the narrator's identity is shaped not only through the lens of individual memory but also through contemporary Nigeria. The analysis conducted by Lauret identifies Cole as a public intellectual, and the author's work with the concepts of cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism, and transnational experience (Lauret 408-428). The research conducted by Shin analyzes Lagos as a place of arrival and multiple diasporas and links it to Afropolitanism and memory (Shin 107-127). It is important to state that the research conducted by Shin proves that Lagos is shaped by multiple movements and affiliations. Thacker analyzes Lagos from the perspective of modernity and suggests that Cole depicts the city as a dynamic urban environment (Thacker 78-99). It is for this reason that current literature has explored transnational identity, homecoming, memory, Lagos, diaspora, modernity, and the structure of narrative. Nevertheless, these researches usually center on individual elements of the novella without paying attention to the process of reconstructing identity and memory. The current paper seeks to fill this gap by considering how migration results in distancing, how memory helps to maintain connection with the homeland, and how coming back alters the understanding of both Lagos and the narrator's own identity. This paper is different from other researches since it

considers migration, memory, coming back, cultural negotiation, and identity within the same context.

Theoretical Approach

The major theoretical perspective used in this research is the theory of cultural identity proposed by Stuart Hall as a continuous process of becoming and not essence. This theory will assist in understanding the development of the narrator's identity through migration, culture and return. Another theoretical perspective is the concept of hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha, which shows the narrator's state as being somewhere between Nigerian cultural history and what she learns from other countries where she resides. The narrator develops her identity through cultural negotiations.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I use a qualitative textual analysis of Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*. The primary text is analyzed using close readings of selected passages that deal with the concepts of memory, return, Lagos, cultural identity, migration, dislocation, language, and belonging. Critical perspectives about cultural identity, hybridity, diaspora, and transnationalism are used to inform the analysis of the primary text. The analysis will concentrate on the unnamed narrator since he is the main source of the perspective through which Lagos and Nigeria are represented. The connections between past experiences and present-day experiences will be the key points in the analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

The return to Lagos becomes the central experience through which the narrator reassesses his identity because he does not return as the same person who previously lived in Nigeria. His years in New York have exposed him to different cultural experiences and

perspectives, creating a confrontation between his earlier Nigerian identity and his present self. At the Nigerian embassy, he observes that “most of the people there on the Monday morning of [his] visit are Nigerians, almost all of them middle-aged” (Cole 8), while noting that “there are as many blue American passports in sight as there are green Nigerian ones” (Cole 8). His observation reflects the complex identities produced through migration and transnational movement. As a dual citizen himself, the narrator occupies an intermediate position between Nigerian and American cultural spaces. Even though he is well versed with Nigerian social practices, his answers often reflect a sense of detachment due to the change in his outlook because of the years he spent away. The experiences that he used to know become foreign experiences because of his changed cultural background. In this case, the process of return becomes an introspection process because the narrator not only sees the changes that have happened in his native city but also those that have occurred within himself. The familiar environment shows the extent of his change, and the unfamiliar environment shows the changes that have occurred in the country as a whole. According to Macheso, the narration presented in the book by Cole reflects disillusionment with the experience of exile and post-independence in Nigeria.

The fact that the return journey involves an aspect of memories means that the emotional dimension involved in the process of returning to Lagos is a result of how Lagos is associated with his early days in terms of his childhood, his family, friends, and experiences. However, the Lagos that the narrator remembers is not the same as the Lagos that the narrator finds himself in due to the lapse of time spent outside the country. Contradictions within Nigeria come to light when the narrator states, “Nigeria’s disconnection from reality is neatly exemplified in three claims to fame” (Cole 79), alluding to the fact that the country is known to be highly religious, happy, and corrupt. His observations

illustrate how distance has become part of his perception of experiences that might otherwise be regarded as quite normal. The social milieu, public encounters, corruption, and day-to-day hardships take on new meaning when observed from a point of view of having migrated. Thus, memory is not a fixed repository of the past. Rather, it alters depending on where the narrator is right now and what his experiences are like. His time spent abroad affects how he understands his past in Nigeria, which means that memory is not a static process but a dynamic one of reconstruction. The fact that Lagos is his home is determined by the fact that it is connected to memory, while at the same time it becomes foreign to him as a result of the changes undergone by the narrator himself.

More than just a location within the plot, Lagos becomes an important site as Lagos becomes an important site where the narrator is able to trigger his memories. The streets, marketplaces, busses, government institutions, houses of worship, and interactions bring back to his mind his earlier experiences in Nigeria. According to Ashcroft, “all constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question: ‘where do I belong?’” and he continues by stating, “it is when place is least spatial, perhaps, that it becomes most identifying” (125). This is an important point as Lagos is not only a physical location in the plot for the narrator. It stands for his childhood, his family, culture, and identity. Lagos has some memories for the narrator, yet they are embedded within a social context. A good example of how place can be linked to memories is the narrator’s remembrance of his father as “Father’s memory has already become so insubstantial, fixed to a few events only, a birthday party, a day at the beach, a discussion one evening in the kitchen” (Cole 48-49). Such ordinary places and occasions hold sentimental memories. At the same time, Lagos is a place of collective memory through its culture, language, religious activities, social habits and culture. Such experiences make him relate to his society

despite spending several years away from his home country. His coming back to Lagos also brings about a change in his connection with Lagos. In this case, memory links him to the past and current experiences make him doubt his past. Thus, Lagos is a place where there is a link between memory and identity.

The position of the narrator between insider and outsider is vital to his identity. Being a Nigerian by birth means that he knows his native culture; however, being away from his homeland during many years creates a certain distance. This position enables him to look at Lagos from various points of view. His connection to the culture shows when he mentions: "I walk out of the museum in bad spirits, and I don't really recover until I visit a nearby buka for some pounded yam and egusi soup" (Cole 57). The familiar food comforts and connects him to his native culture once again. Also, he notes that "Culture, at least in this one corner of the city, seems to be alive and well" (Cole 65). Being an insider, he can understand the customs, expressions and everyday routine as those things are familiar to him. Nevertheless, his time away from Nigeria also enables him to have certain distance. It is possible to observe the corruption, inequality, weak institutions and social disorder from another point of view. Rodríguez calls this experience "homecoming of the cosmopolitan stranger" (789-802). Consequently, the narrator does not deny or idealize Nigeria. The formation of his identity occurs in between cultural familiarity and criticism. This position corresponds to what Bhabha defines as an intermediate cultural space where the formation of identity occurs between two cultural experiences. However, the narrator stays attached to Nigeria, although he has changed the way he understands it. The narrator's identity gets recreated through migration, memory, cultural familiarity, and current experience.

The act of migration itself sets the stage for the transformation of the narrator's identity. Geographic distance is created when he leaves

Nigeria, while the fact that he is living outside the country provides new cultural experiences. Even when he returns to Lagos, his return does not take away the psychological distance that he feels. He captures his experience by stating, "I am breathing the air of the city for the first time in a decade and a half, its white smoke and other dust which are as familiar as my own breath" (Cole 16). From the statement, it can be seen that the narrator is emotionally attached to Lagos, but his experience abroad has changed how he perceives the city. His displacement has continued because he has developed an entirely different culture to view his home country. Adeaga's analysis on transnational migration makes sense in this case. He cannot return entirely to his former self since migration has altered his way of seeing things. This point demonstrates transnational identification, which means that identification is a result of experiences in different geographical areas. Even though he still has interest in Lagos, it comes along with the perspectives he developed after leaving the place of his birth. It shows how Cole perceives migration as a process that changes the concept of home. Home is neither fully destroyed nor kept the same; home is constantly defined by means of remembrance and mobility.

Language is one of the essential aspects of culture and identity since it links individuals to sense and practice. Knowledge of the Nigerian language and culture on the part of the narrator builds up the relationship between the narrator and Lagos. The proverb, "Every day is for the thief, but one day is for the owner" (Cole 1), represents the wisdom of Nigerian culture and sets the stage for introducing local phrases. Moreover, the author shows culture through common experience, which includes market places, buses, public places, familial connections, religion, and social interactions. These experiences represent the development of identity through common cultural practices. As Kappel states, the travelogue by Cole employs memory as a practice in reconstructing the

cultural experience. The reaction of the narrator to the society in Nigeria includes both familiarity and critical perspective due to the time spent away from home. The term "Janded" not only shows Nigerian cultural language but also demonstrates the effects of migration. Hence, everyday life becomes a site for reconstructing identity. The narrator re-establishes his connections with culture while acknowledging his changed position. There are contradictions within Lagos, too, such as inequality, corruption, creativity, and cultural vibrancy. For this reason, Cole does not present the culture of Nigeria as something unified and perfect. Identity of the narrator is formed on the basis of his interaction between culture, migration, and Nigerian reality.

The narrative structure used by Cole highlights the link between memory and identity. *Every Day Is for the Thief* is based on observations, incidents, reflections, and visual accounts rather than a continuous story. Such structure is based on the selective quality of memory. "Memory and the intervening years, many of which I have spent in cramped English flats and American apartments, limitations I have endured like a prince in exile" (Cole 18). The quoted words of the author connect memory to migration and illustrate how his experience outside his hometown impacts his understanding of Lagos. The memories preserve only certain images, places, discussions, and feelings but not the entire experience. Cole shows such feature of memory by depicting Lagos through separate scenes and creating an impression about it in a gradual manner. According to Li, the travel through Lagos allows the narrator to feel home in a temporary way. The photographs that come with the work also make the link between seeing and remembering more solid. Fragmentation is the symbol of the complexity of the narrator's feelings towards his home, where he feels at the same time familiar, nostalgic, disappointed, and distant. It is only due to fragmentation that he experiences all of these feelings at once. Therefore, through this

way, form becomes an integral part of the thematic message in the book.

CONCLUSION

In Teju Cole's novel, *Every Day Is For the Thief*, the process of identity formation is seen as fluid and influenced by one's memory, migration, culture and identity. The visit of the narrator to Lagos is significant since it helps him reconsider his relationship with Nigeria and reflect upon his migration-induced identity transformation. Being both insider and outsider, the narrator can perceive the cultural traditions and at the same time make observations on social life of Lagos. It means that Lagos is not only a physical location but also a space of memory and identity. The importance of memory for the identity formation process can be explained by the fact that the narrator's childhood memories, family relationships and previous experiences are linked to certain places in Lagos. However, those memories are always perceived by him in relation to the new experience. Thus, Lagos where he was living before is not the same Lagos which he meets after years of absence. Migration adds another layer of complexity to the narrator's identity. His life in America shapes his perceptions and expectations, thus turning his return into a kind of cultural compromise. Though he still has ties with Nigeria, he cannot become his former self again. His transnational experiences shape an identity that exists between multiple cultural contexts. The fragmented narrative in Cole's work also supports the argument that identity emerges from separate memories, experiences, and observations of the narrator. In this regard, the narrative reflects the selective nature of memory itself. In conclusion, the novel shows that identity is not determined by either birthplace or nationality. Identity is shaped by migration and memory.

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