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Ethical Dilemmas in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's 2003 Caine-Prize-winning Writing "Weight of Whispers"

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Abstract: For the praxis of ethical literary criticism, identifying the moment(s) of ethical turn is crucial. In the short story "Weight of Whispers" written by a prominent contemporary Kenyan writer, philosopher of modern times, and public intellectual Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, the ethical turn emerges as a pivotal feature that not only serves as a literary device to depict the ethical dilemmas faced by the characters in their forced exile, but also symbolizes the tangible symptoms of societal ills prevalent in Kenya's specific context. This article undertakes a comprehensive exploration of these ethical turns, delving into their manifestations, implications, and the profound insights they offer into the human condition and the underbelly, thereby enhancing our understanding of the story's ethical depth and its significance within the realm of African literature and beyond.

Keywords: ethical turn; empathy; "Weight of Whispers"; Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

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1. Introduction

In the wider eastern Africa of post-2000, Kenya-born Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor certainly has established for herself a niche as an excellent writer, "whose novels *Dust* (2013) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) enjoy wide circulation and near-global critical acclaim, going by the journal articles, book chapters, conference presentations, and even translations into different languages across the world that the works have variously attracted" (Siundu 2022: 1). Actually, in as early as 2003, she won the Caine Prize for African Writing with her short story titled "Weight of Whispers". From that moment onwards, her influence has expanded significantly, whether as a writer, as a philosopher in the modern era, or as a public intellectual.

"Weight of Whispers" presents a profound first-person account of the journey of Boniface Louis R Kuseremane and his family as refugees in Kenya: As a royalty family, they have lived a life full of travels and luxuries, ill-prepared for the impact of the outbreak of the genocide in their own country. Fleeing to Kenya in panic with only a few personal effects and little cash at hand, they hope for a short stay *en route* to Europe, relying on overseas contacts. However, they soon found themselves isolated. The harsh reality dawns. Now, at 37, Boniface, as the paterfamilias, must shoulder the responsibility, struggling to extricate them from their deteriorating, nightmarish situation. With each passing day, their exile, poverty, and despair deepen.

Thus, one of the notable points worth discussingis the ways this story weaves a complex tapestry of the challenges that refugees endure in the face of displacement and adversity, exploring not only the human conditions of the suffering individuals but also the societal conditions that surround them. In Edgar Fred Nabutanyi's words, the story is "an investigation of the pain that surfaces when someone's world is turned upside down" (Nabutanyi 2022: 21). But just as Tanzanian-born British novelist and academic Abd al-Razzaq Gurnah—Chair of the 2003 Caine Prize judges and the winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature—says, the story's "great strength is the subtle and suggestive way it dramatizes the condition of the refugee and also successfully incorporates so many large issues."(Gurnah 2003) Therefore, an in-depth thematic analysis should be directed to the portrayal of the main characters, including Boniface's mother Agnethe, his sister Chi-Chi, and his fiancée Lune.

The present article undertakes a comprehensive study of the profound insight "Weight of Whispers" offers concerning the way the institutional and collective depravity contaminates the personal ethics and how this contamination process blinkers an individual person, hazardously narrowing down his/her scope of ethical empathy.

2. Collective and Institutional Depravity

As Nie Zhenzhao states, literary ethics criticism "aims at dissecting cases of ethical choices in specific historical contexts and among the complicated ethical relationships between man and self, man and others, man and society, and man and nature" (Nie 2014: 278). In "Weight of Whispers," as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the tangible symptoms of societal ills in the form of institutional and collective depravity are rife in Kenya. This is manifested through the intricate web of moral connections binding an individual to their inner self, to those around them, and to the broader social fabric.

2.1 Individualmoral decline

In a good society, every individual has the right to and the responsibility for a safe and manageable environment where they can feel secure. Now we are going to observe and judge in terms of ethics the ways how several individuals in Kenya—the Indian-Kenyan jewelry shopkeeper and two of Boniface's fellow Rwandans in Kenya, René Katilibana and Professor George—maltreat him. Their behavior towards him serves to highlight the complex web of human relationships and the often-unexpected ways in which people can wound one another, especially when one is already in a vulnerable state like Boniface.

2.1.1 An Indian Kenyan woman, a dishonest businesswoman

The first encounter of humiliation is at a jewelry shop. Boniface, facing a challenging financial situation, enters the shop with the aim of selling his "24 carat, customized gold and sapphire bracelet" (Owuor 2019: 84) to acquire the money necessary for his family's well-being. Two days after he parts with the bracelet for 15, 000 Kenyan shillings, he is told by one of his compatriots that the bracelet can be sold 100, 000 shillings. He returns to confront the Indian shop-keeper, who "tells me to leave before I speak" (Ibid). She even calls the police when he attempts to discuss the value of the bracelet. Boniface walks out into the street and is dazed by the pain of being conned and humiliated:

> Outside the shop, my hands are shaking. I have to remind myself to take the next step and the next step and the next step. My knees are light. I am unable to look into the eyes of those on the streets. What is my mind doing, getting around the intricacies of a foreign currency? (Ibid)

His mind struggling with the intricacies of a foreign currency at this moment highlights his state of being not fully able to cope with the reality he is in. This is also ironic when you think that his former occupation is a banker. This helps to underscore his desperate state as an exile. When Boniface goes out of the shop, the woman insults him by calling him "*takataka*", which means "rubbish," revealing her lack of respect and human decency. As Nabutanyi rightly points out:

> As a former prince, diplomat and scholar, it can be argued that Kuseremane [Boniface] is used to or expects some degree of deference from ordinary people. However, his engagement with [the woman] accentuates his depreciated social status. This is because [she treats] him in a manner that reduces him to a nonentity. (Nabutanyi 2022: 25)

This encounter highlights how power dynamics can play out in unethical ways, with the more vulnerable, like Boniface in his exile, being exploited. It also reflects poorly on the social fabric, as it shows that some individuals are willing to trample on others' dignity and rights for personal gain, leaving victims like Boniface feeling powerless, humiliated, and adrift in a foreign land where they expect at least a modicum of fairness.

2.1.2 René, a false friend

At the start of the story, Boniface and his mother are optimistic that their network of influential friends will offer help, be it financial or directional. The word "friend" crops up around 12 times in the beginning of the narrative, with 8 instances reflecting his strong hope in friendship. For example, when landing in Nairobi, he thinks, "Soon, we would be in Europe, among friends" (Owuor 2019: 81). Later, unable to arrange papers for Europe, he notes that "Old friends have not returned phone calls" (Ibid). Nevertheless, they still indulge the fond hope of the help from their friends, his mother once saying, "What of the response of our friends in exile … ah! Not yet … a matter of time" (Ibid). He waits for calls, believing that his friends will not abandon him, rooted in past good times and trust. But as time passes, anxiety chips away at his hope, though he persists. The appearance of René Katilibana gives him a new hope. He excitedly anticipates another meeting with René, stating "Ah! But tonight! Tonight, Club Balafon. I am meeting a compatriot and friend, René Katilibana"

(Owuor 2019: 87).

Boniface previously helped René with a sugar deal, declining fifty thousand francs in return to preserve friendship's purity, as "I had enjoyed humoring a friend" (Owuor 2019: 88). Now, desperate for money to flee to Europe due to the dangerous news that his name has been included in the "list of *génocidaires*"—genocide perpetrators—and his family's need— "six expectant eyes waiting for me to pull out an aeroplane from my pocket" (Ibid 87)—he seeks René at the club to ask for a $5,000 loan, relying on their past bond.

But René, who seemingly does not know of Boniface's potential list issue as he asks "where he was and what he was doing" (Ibid 89), initially listens and then pretends to forget. He does not introduce Boniface to his other friends and even asks, "Refresh my memory, who are you?" (Ibid), shattering the friendship's ethical code. Boniface's internal struggle is evident when he describes the physical and emotional reactions he has even after a dance, as described below:

> There are places within, where a sigh can hide. It is cold and hard and smells of fear. In my throat something cries, "hrgghghg". I cannot breathe. And then I can. So I hum:
>
> "Mhhhh … L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenue …"
>
> It is odd, the sounds that make a grown man weep. (Ibid 90)

René's betrayal plunges him into despair and confusion. The band's playing of the nostalgic tune of "*Indépendance Cha-Cha*," Joseph Kabasele's once famous song, is nothing other than Boniface's lamentation about "the loss of his privileged life" (Kruger 2009: 1), which is now an "old anthem of anguish" (Owuor 2019: 89) for him and strongly stirs his emotions. Marie Kruger explains the ironic symbolism that the song has come to have in the course of time:

> Once, the desire for political power and sovereignty was immortalized in Kabasele's well-known song; now the historical figures lauded in the upbeat celebration of Independence—Lumumba, Tshombe and Kasavuvu—have become martyrs and assassins, the ghosts of a past which failed to deliver on its promise of peace and prosperity. (2009: 1)

When the band stops playing this song and the customers start to leave in disarray, Boniface finds that Rene and his cohort have disappeared without a word. Thus, another symbolism of the song may be the breakdown of social and ethical norms. René's behavior is a blatant display of moral turpitude. His act of feigning forgetfulness and his calculated move to avoid any obligation, revealing his self-centered nature, completely violate the principles of loyalty and reciprocity that underpin a true friendship. His actions not only shatter Boniface's hopes but also send ripples through the social fabric. It serves as a harsh reminder of how fragile relationships can become when one party fails to uphold the ethical standards expected in a community, leaving the injured party to grapple with a profound sense of betrayal.

2.1.3 Professor George, a self-interested compatriot

Another individual that draws our attention in this story is Professor George, a compatriot of Boniface's. He is a complex character, deeply involved in the political domain and currently struggling to navigate the difficult

waters of displacement in Kenya. He has a connection to the Kuseramane family through his sister Maria, who is a friend of Agnethe. The two families stumble upon each other fortuitously in a church on a Sunday. Then, under the invitation from Professor George, the Kuseramanes explores the Nairobi Animal Orphanage.

At first, Professor George appears amicable towards Boniface. Under the guise of helpful guidance about the lifestyle of crocodiles, Professor George imparts to Boniface the crucial survival skill of "camouflage" (Owuor 2019: 100), and Boniface even gets to watch one perform this act with remarkable finesse. However, everything changes the moment Boniface reveals that their name is on the feared list. Professor George's attitude does a complete 180-degree turn. His once-warm demeanor vanishes, replaced by a cold and distant stance. This sudden shift is a harsh revelation of the cruel reality that not only refugees like Boniface but also legal emigrates like Professor George must endure. It also epitomizes the crude, amoral necessity for self-preservation, or "camouflage" as it were, at the cost of warm camaraderie when faced with potential threats and widespread discrimination.

In the case of George, he is always feeling the risk under the danger. Despite the threat to his current position in Kenya, he has found a way to live in Kenya rather comparatively safe, but that position is not stable. In the people around him, he is really a Rwandan, not a Kenyan. He knows that the moment they learn his nationality, people may completely change. So he wants to hide behind "camouflage"; he wants to keep a low profile in order to survive. George's abrupt about-face poses significant ethical questions. His behavior shows that in the face of adversity, some are prone to sacrifice others to protect their own interests, highlighting the fragility of the social and ethical fabric that should bind people together during difficult times.

2.2 Institutional depravity

Now, it is time for us to direct a lens of ethical criticism toward the characters who represent the mechanism of the "whole system" that oppresses helpless outsiders like Boniface.

As in the real world, in Owuor's story, Nairobi is depicted as an NGO-industrial-complex central. Various NGOs and community-based organizations are expected to provide services and security for refugees. However, these institutions are ethically ineffective for they fail to protect vulnerable populations and exploit their power for personal gains. The descriptions of the Kuseremanses' encounters with the violence and exploitation generated by institutions effectively critiques the underlying dynamics of power and resource transfer that perpetuate suffering and marginalization.

2.2.1 Indifference of European and American embassies

In "Weight of Whispers," the Kuseremane family's dignity and self-esteem are severely undermined during their efforts to obtain visas at the European and American embassies in Nairobi. These institutions contribute to their ordeal, engaging in disguised refusals and invasive, insensitive questioning.

The Europeans' approach to the family's visa applications is marked by disguised refusals. They seemingly process the applications "smil[ing] with their teeth" but in a way that leads to an interminable wait, or as Boniface observes (Ibid 85). Their condescending aloofness and hypocrisy are palpable, with false smiles that merely exacerbate the family's exasperation. They are using these superficial pleasantries—the oppressor's version of "camouflaging"—to mask their real intentions of rejecting the applications, which is not only dishonest but also demeaning to the applicants.

When they turn to the American embassy, the family's plight takes a turn for the worse. The visa officer there displays blatant hostility. She bombards them with invasive questions about personal property, such as "Bank details … bank statement … how much money […] title deed [, and p]roof of domicile in country of origin … And letter from employer" (Owuor 2019: 85). Requiring such documents under such circumstances fails to take into account the real-life challenges the applicants are facing. It shows a lack of empathy and understanding, as if the officer is more concerned with bureaucratic box-ticking than with assessing the genuine need and eligibility of the applicants. The officer's extreme rudeness is on full display when she "folds her papers, bangs them on the table and frowns as if [Bonafice] has wasted her time" before heartlessly "tossing [his] passport out of her little window into [his] outstretched hands" (Ibid 85). The officer's blatant behavior sends a message that the applicants are not worthy of basic respect or proper consideration, reducing them to a state of supplication and hopelessness. The conduct of these embassy officials calls into question the moral compass of these institutions. But the real problem with it is that it in turn induces those applicants to internalize such a hopeless supplicant mentality.

2.2.2 Discrimination and extortion at the immigration office

In the narrative of "Weight of Whispers," Boniface's experience of visiting the immigration office after the expiration of the three-month visitor's pass and having the money he carries with him extorted presents a harrowing picture of his ethical struggle and reveals the dark underbelly of the society he is trapped in. The officer, abusing his power, demeans and devalues him, creating a power imbalance that sets the stage for further exploitation. The officer then resorts to extortion, using the threat of reporting Boniface's illegal presence under the immigration charter:

> He whispers that he is compelled by Section 3(f) of the immigration charter to report my illegal presence. He cracks his knuckles. Creak Crack. He smiles quickly. Fortunately, all things are possible. The cost of silence is US $ 500. I have 3,000 shillings.
>
> He took it all. But he returned 50 shillings for"bus fare". (Ibid 93)

The officer, through his menacing hand actions and whispered threats, leaves Boniface with no choice but to part with his meager funds, even though he can scarcely afford it.

In this desperate situation, Boniface is forced into a morally dubious act of using a false identity: "Under 'name' I write René Katilibana. Address, Club Balafon" (Ibid). The stress and hopelessness caused by the officer's behavior makes Boniface feel that he has no other recourse but to engage in retaliation and deception. This illustrates how one person's unethical conduct can trigger a chain reaction of moral decline in others, especially in circumstances where they are prevented from using legitimate means to reach their goals. Boniface's encounter with extortion is a microcosm of the unjust ethical landscape he navigates. It illuminates the power dynamics that tip overwhelmingly in favor of the corrupt, the identity struggles of a once-privileged individual reduced to a state of powerlessness, and the primal and animal-like survival instincts that kick in when faced with such adversity. Through this episode, we gain a profound understanding of the moral decay where the powerful prey on the weak and, more importantly, the victims are in turn incited to engage themselves in amoral acts.

2.2.3 Dehumanization at a Kenyan police station

In the text, Boniface's experience at the police station has a huge impact on his self-identity perception. In ethical literary criticism, identity is the positioning of an individual in the social ethical system. According to Nie's argument on ethical literary criticism, a human being's identity is "an identification of his or her existence in society" (Nie 2014: 263) and therefore it is something "recognized and accepted by society" (Ibid 264). Yang andZhang argue that "we are responsible for the responsibilities and duties it entails" and that "[a]s identity is associated with ethic; the change of identity is likely to lead to the ethical confusion and conflict" (2024: 242–43). It is just the thing that the Kenyan authorities deprive Boniface of.

The wrong identification and unfair treatment from the police station brought about a revolutionary change in his self-perception. The most severe identity struggle comes to Boniface when he is asked by the three police officers to show his ID card. He fails to show one and is immediately labeled with "[a] litany of crimes" such as an "illegal alien," "resisting arrest," "attempted escape" (Owuor 2019: 95). This wrong identity severely damages his self-identity perception which was originally built on his own experiences, status and dignity. He used to be a person of a certain status, but now he is treated as a criminal. This makes him confused about his own identity and he does not know how to recognize himself within this wrongly defined framework, thus falling into a state of confusion in self-identity perception. The rough actions of the police station, such as the so-called "confiscation" of his property—keepsakes like a "gold insignia ring" (Ibid 77) that designates him as a prince or the photo of his family, makes him deeply understand the vulnerability of his once-established identity in the face of power. He laments that in exile, his existence completely depends on the tolerance of others. This awareness makes him deny the value of his former identity. He begins to think that he is worthless in the social and ethical order and can only be forced to accept the reality of being degraded and having his identity stripped, thus moving towards self-negation in self-identity perception.

Boniface'sstruggle with self-identity recognition urges him to recall a past experience: Once in a café in the Netherlands, back in times when he was still a successful businessman, Boniface met a man from Sierra Leone, who sold risqué underwear although he actually had a master's degree in sociology. The man came up to him and told him: "Africans, we be overeducated fools. [...] No one sees your knowing when you have no feet to stand in" (Ibid 97). Back then, Boniface was ashamed in front of his Dutch business partners. Now in Kenya, he begins to realize that he is almost in the same situation as the Sierra Leone man and understands the truth of his words.

Boniface laments that "[i]n exile we lower our heads so that we do not see in the mirror of another's eyes, what we suspect about ourselves: that our precarious existence depends entirely on the whim of another's tolerance of our presence" (Ibid). The police brutality brings home to Boniface, and presumably other refugees as well, the vulnerability of his once-established identity, which might have been favorably associated with status, education, and authority in his home country. Reduced to an "illegal alien" by the police and society, he is at the capricious mercy of others' tolerance. The word "whim" in his lamentation emphasizes the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of the acceptance or rejection such governmental societal institutions as the police give. Boniface's insight into the whimsical nature of the unchecked power exercised upon dislocated people finds expression in his painful reflection: "Later on, much later on, I will wonder what makes it possible for one man to hit another man for no reason other than the fact that he can" (Ibid 78). The only counterargument he can find

is feeble wishful thinking with a pathetic tag question anticipating denial: "but to be human is to be intrinsically, totally, resolutely good, is it not?" (Owuor 2019: 80).

Boniface's very survival hinges not only on the momentary decision of those in power but also on the general public's attitude. The former, by fueling social stigma and discrimination against the immigrants among the latter, enforces an unjust social order and creates a ripple effect of fear and mutual distrust throughout the immigrant community, as is observable in Professor George's case. For example, the police arrest Boniface without considering his background, and those street vendors, who were fighting for survival before Boniface's eyes, now laugh at his plight. Together, these people deprive Boniface of a legitimate identity within the social, ethical order. The ridicule of the people on the street also shows that discrimination against immigrants is widespread in society. The whole social and ethical atmosphere is full of prejudice and exclusion, which exacerbates the protagonist's dilemma. Therefore, he deeply understands "a phrase [which] crawls into [his] mind: 'Psychic Oblation'" (Ibid 97). It refers to the "giving up" of one's inner self, the submission of one's psyche to the harsh and unjust social forces that are acting upon him. He has to offer up his psychological integrity and his former identity with the associated self-worth as a form of sacrifice in the face of a discriminatory social order that refuses to recognize him, that degrades him, that derives him of his identity, and that leaves him completely at the mercy of others' whims.

2.2.4 Sexual exploitation at the UNHCR

As we have seen in Section 2.2.3 of this article, Boniface's despondency is further accentuated when he is faced with the sexual harassment that his fiancée and his younger sister have to suffer. Feeling emasculated as a paterfamilias, Boniface recites a gnomic passage to himself: "Annals of war decree that conquest of landscapes is incomplete unless the vanquisher's women are 'taken'. Where war is crudest, the women are discarded, afterwards for their men to find" (Ibid 103).

Although this could potentially be construed as a tacit acceptance of the sacrificeon his part and a philosophical rationalization of the exploitation, it must be pointed out that he is only evading the harsh reality that he has unethically bartered his female relatives into sexual servitude for the well-being of the family. This can be contrasted to what Boniface once said to the European academics about the Holocaust in his youth: he was engaged in cerebral musings about historical atrocities and the moral ambiguities surrounding war and sacrifice, exploring concepts such as "sacrificial predilection of being" and "oblation of men by men to men" (Ibid 79). His impassivity, like asking a Holocaust researcher if he was a Jew and reducing him to bitter tears and was only driven by an intellectual curiosity. At that stage, he was somewhat detached, observing the pain and trauma from a certain distance, perhaps not fully grasping the true depth of human suffering. In a way, Boniface at that time assumed an indifferent position similar to that of the Kenyan high officials and the general Kenyan public.

The excruciating pain stemming from Boniface's total emasculation is manifested through his futilely violent outbursts. He, as a patriarch, passes the unethical abuse he suffers onto his own people. He rips the visas into fragments and lashes out at both his sister and his fiancée: "I watched from afar [...] as the tall man tears the papers to shreds. I am curious about the weeping woman with her shorn hair [...] I see the tall black man lift his hand up right up and bring it crashing into the back of the girl" (Ibid 108). The detached, almost somnambulistic narrative stance discloses the extreme agony that the narrator-protagonist is incapable of grasping, let alone elucidating. This narrative detachment may be understood also as the narrator's irresponsible evasion of

recognizing his inner beast-like brutality (provoked from without by the institutional brutality). Ironically, despite Lune's assertion, "but we shall live, *chéri* … we shall live … we shall live well" (Owuor 2019: 108), the steep price the women are compelled to pay culminates in the death and fragmentation of the family.

The UNHCR's actions reveal a power imbalance where those in authority within the UNHCR use their position to prey on the powerless, forcing them into demeaning and life-altering situations. Not only does it shatter the immediate family unit, but it also sends a message to the broader refugee community that even the supposed protectors cannot be trusted.

3. Boniface's Ethical Turn: The Waning Empathy Toward His Family

Now, let us examine the unethical predicaments suffered by the major character Boniface and his family members, who "under the inhospitable location of Nairobi […] are stripped of their façade of respectability, affluence and identity to reveal the corporeality of their pain" (Nabutanyi 2022: 21). Personal ethics forms the moral backbone of an individual's life. Rooted in family values, culture, and personal beliefs, it governs behavior in all spheres. Key aspects include honesty, respect for others, and responsibility. In daily life, personal ethics determines the ways in which interactions with family members and other societal individuals take place. Upholding such ethics not only molds character but also makes contributions to a more just and harmonious social environment. It plays a crucial role in navigating what Nie Zhenzhao terms the "ethical dilemmas"—situations that compels a character or characters in a story to make "paradoxical moral choices" between two (or more) options under the condition that "if either choice cannot be made without respect to the other, this will lead to a moral dilemma and violation of general moral principles" (Nie 2014: 230)—by facilitating the making of decisions that are in line with one's core values.

3.1 Boniface's diminishing filial piety towards his mother

Boniface's relationship with his mother, Agnethe, is rife with complexities and ethical dilemmas within the context of their refugee family.

At the beginning, Boniface shows his filial piety. In his eyes, Agnethe is "egal, greying, her diamond earrings dance, her nose is slight raised" (Owuor 2019: 81), which portrays her as a woman of high social standing, with a sense of elegance, a bit of pride, and a past that has been marked by luxury and a certain social status. "Agnethe-mama was used to things falling into place before her feet touched the ground" (Ibid 82), which, through an exaggerated expression, vividly presents the extreme smoothness of Agnethe's past life—Literally, it seems that all things had been automatically arranged properly even before her feet had truly taken action (touched the ground), and which profoundly implies her past living state: She was in a relatively high social class, possessing abundant resources and powerful connections; whether dealing with daily affairs or handling major events, she did not need to do things by herself or worry too much, with everything developing in the direction she expected. So, when Agnethe expresses fatigue and a desire for comfortable accommodation, Boniface quickly arranges for the family to stay at the Nairobi Hilton. Besides, her aristocratic background initially leads her to be critical of Kenyan culture, as demonstrated by her dissatisfaction with local jewelry.

"Their language and manner are not as sweet and gentle as ours."

She straightens her robes, eyes wide with the innocence of an unsubtle put down.

"Mama!" I scold. The women giggle as do females who have received affirmation of their particular and unassailable advantage over other women. (Owuor 2019: 78)

This passage serves to characterize the experience of Agnethe as an expatriate, who instead of trying to understand and adapt to the local culture, is quick to judge and distance herself. For Agnethe's such reaction, Boniface, who does not realize as well that they are actually in a state of exile, senses that his mother's speech is not appropriate enough to maintain harmony and stability in the new environment, so he shows his disproval by saying "Mama!" in a seemingly scolding tone, which causes his female dependents to giggle in the same way as women who have been assured of their unique and unbeatable edge over other females. This, in some sense, shows that at this time, family members can still communicate frankly with each other without hiding anything.

However, as the harsh reality soon sets in, Boniface is under immense pressure. He tries to balance the expectations of his mother, who had long been accustomed to the effortless and all-going-well life pattern, with the financial hardships they face. He once attempts to communicate their economic situation to her but to no avail, caught between respecting her feelings and the cold truth of their circumstances. This places him in an acute ethical dilemma, where his filial heart clashes with his inability to change their situation due to the inappropriate behaviors he has encountered outside the home, unbeknownst to his family.

Agnethe's actions and mindset, shaped by her past and the current crisis, create a significant ethical challenge for Boniface as she burdens him with unfulfillable expectations. Her arrogant mindset blinds her and the family to their emerging refugee reality. Her initial escape plan, which relies on wealthy friends abroad, collapses when rumors surface that they are involved in the home country's genocide. In her desperation, she places a heavy burden on Boniface, incessantly pressuring him with the question "when are we leaving?" Her unyielding hope becomes a source of great stress for him, highlighting the ethical conundrum between her expectations and his capabilities.

However, Boniface's traditional role as the family's main decision-maker is challenged for the first time when the "three-month visitor's pass" expires. It is Agnethe who becomes more worldly-wise and gives Boniface sensible advice to register as refugees, instead of hugging the vain hope of seeking employment in Nairobi[1].

Then the situation takes a dramatic turn when Boniface's fiancée decides to prostitute herself for migration papers and tickets. At this tense moment, Agnethe suggests selling her wedding ring. This act reverses the traditional family roles between Boniface and his mother. This shows that despite Boniface being the male expected to shoulder family responsibilities, the harsh reality of their situation has forced his mother to step in and make difficult decisions, highlighting the breakdown of normal family hierarchies under the weight of collective and institutional depravity. In a more stable environment, Boniface would likely be the one making such crucial financial decisions. However, the desperate circumstances, including the unethical demands from

[1] Boniface's naïvely believes in the efficacy of his academic qualifications such as a "PhD in Diplomacy or a Masters in Geophysics." His dream is quickly shattered by the officer's ridicule: "*Ati PhD. PhD gani? Wewe refugee, bwana!*" (PhD? What PhD? You are a refugee, man) (Owuor 2019: 92; 93).

institutions like the need for his fiancée to resort to prostitution for migration opportunities, have upended their family dynamic. Agnethe's offer to sell her wedding ring is a sign of her willingness to do whatever it takes to help the family, even if it means assuming a role that is typically the male's in traditional family structures. This also reveals the extent to which Boniface has been overwhelmed by the disappointment from his family.

However, for the most part, Boniface fails to recognize the ethical struggles his mother has been through. He is so consumed by his own predicaments, such as his attempts to meet her expectations and deal with their financial issues, that he overlooks the sacrifices and changes Agnethe has undergone. His relationship with his mother is thus a complex web of unmet expectations, role reversals, and unrecognized struggles, all set against the backdrop of their life as refugees.

3.2 Boniface's destroyed sibling affection

The relationship between Boniface and Chi-Chi serves as a poignant example of how institutional and collective depravity can contaminate personal ethics and narrow one's scope of ethical empathy.

Since childhood, Boniface and Chi-Chi have shared a deep emotional bond. Chi-Chi's affectionate address of "Bu-Bu" and her instinctive touch on his waistband obviously when she feels nervous are manifestations of their closeness. In their exile, Boniface's repeated warnings to Chi-Chi about not casually leaving the room are a clear sign of his moral obligation to protect her. This is an inherent part of their sibling relationship, highlighting values of loyalty and protection. However, the harsh realities of their exile, influenced by institutional and collective failings, begin to erode this relationship.

The institutional depravity becomes glaring when Boniface's family, after registering as refugees at the UNHCR, learned of an opportunity to relocate to Canada. The ultimatum issued by the relevant office for Chi-Chi and his fiancée to be "examined by the officials at their homes for a night" (Owuor 2019: 103), a thinly veiled euphemism for sexual exploitation, is a gross violation of their dignity and rights. The UNHCR officials, in a morally bankrupt act, take advantage of the family's eagerness to be resettled as refugees in Canada and carried out sexual extortion. This institutional corruption places Chi-Chi in an impossible ethical dilemma: Chi-Chi, an introverted 20-year-old with an innate ability to sense emotions, was already vulnerable in the chaotic Nairobi environment, lamenting "So many faces…So many spirits" (Ibid 85). The unethical demands from the UNHCR officials further pushes her to the brink. When Lune mentions a "certain… co-operation," "a condition from the medical examination" (Ibid 103), Chi-Chi "clutches her body, staving off in her way something she is afraid of" (Ibid) which demonstrates her fierce desire to protect her bodily autonomy. Despite this, she ultimately consents to prostitution to secure a better future for her family, sacrificing her dignity.

When Boniface sees Chi-Chi coming home with *laissez-passers* for Canadian migration, which are obtained by prostitute herself, his ethical empathy, which was once centered on protecting her, is clouded. In a fit of rage, he deals her a hard blow that later takes her life. This act, which goes against his role as a protector, is a result of the contamination of his personal ethics by the insidious and abhorrent institutional depravity. The system that should have safeguarded the vulnerable instead creates a situation where the most heinous forms of exploitation are allowed to thrive. It forced his loved ones into such desperate and demeaning situations, pushing him to the brink of losing his moral compass and causing irreparable harm. The institutional depravity not only destroys the lives of those directly involved but also warps the relationships and values that once held this family

together, highlighting the truly despicable nature of a system that fails so catastrophically in its most fundamental duties.

Even after Chi-Chi's death, Boniface's feelings for her remain, as evidenced by his long vigil at the cemetery. However, the damage has been done. The relationship, once a model of love and loyalty, is now marred by moral failure. The extreme circumstances, brought about by institutional and collective depravity, has not only shattered the ethical framework of their sibling relationship but also exposes the vulnerability of personal ethics in the face of such overwhelming corruption. Boniface's initial protective instincts are overshadowed by the tragic events, and Chi-Chi's struggles with bodily autonomy and the unethical demands placed upon her becomes a symbol of the broader ethical failures in the society they find themselves in.

3.3 Boniface's tainted marital kinship

The institutional depravity contaminates personal ethics and restricts the scope of ethical empathy, which is most evidently manifested in the dwindling intimacy between Boniface and Lune. The degree to which he once loved her equals the degree to which he later loathes her.

Boniface was originally a person with a high level of empathic sensitivity, especially demonstrated in his first meeting with his fiancée. When Boniface met Lune, she was in the midst of great grief over the deaths of her parents, who had died in a car accident. Boniface could keenly sense Lune's confusion and pain at that time. "She seemed to be hovering above her parents' grave, deciding whether to join them, fly away or stay." (Owuor 2019: 81) Boniface understood that she was at a crossroads in her life, filled with inner struggles. This profound insight into Lune's situation reflects Boniface's high sensitivity to others' emotions. Boniface's invitation to Lune to leave the ballet troupe where she was studying in France and stay with him forever further demonstrates his empathy. He not only saw Lune's predicament but also, through practical actions, tried to give her a new direction in life, helping her to break free from the current pain and confusion. He hoped to use his company to help Lune emerge from the shadow of losing her parents and find the meaning of life again. This invitation is a concrete manifestation of his putting himself in Lune's shoes and considering her future, showing his deep care and sympathy for Lune.

As in the cases of Agnethe and Chi-Chi, Boniface is at first regarded by Lune as her anchor. When she asks Boniface "*Chéri, que faisons-nous maintenant* ?" (What do we do now?) and "*Où vas-tu, chéri* ?" (Where are you going?) (Ibid 81, 88), Boniface is the person she thinks she can rely on, expecting him to navigate life's difficulties and offer guidance. In the early days, her affectionate bond with Boniface is palpable:

> Lune is watching me, her long neck propped up by her hands. Her hair covers half her face. It is always a temptation to sweep it away from her eyes, a warm silk. When the tips of my fingers stroke her hair, the palms of my hand skim her face. Lune becomes still, drinking, feeling and tasting the stroking. (Ibid 83)

This passage depicts an intimate moment between Boniface and Lune, revealing their relationship and emotional states. Boniface's impulse to sweep Lune's hair from her eyes and his tender touch imply a deep physical connection. Lune's stillness as she savors the contact shows mutual enjoyment. Boniface's detailed observations of Lune, like her hair covering half her face, reflect his emotional connection. Lune's response, described as

"drinking, feeling and tasting" the touch, indicates a strong emotional bond and their mutual emotional closeness.

However, as exile hardships mount, such intimacy is eroding, in particular when Lune's actions take a morally ambiguous turn. Faced with Boniface's ineffectuality, she seems to have made a secret decision to acquiesce to the UNHCR officials' sexual extortion, as indicated in her behavior as soon as she comes out of the UNHCR together with Chi-Chi, who has been similarly threatened. While Chi-Chi, faced with the same request from the officials, displays her dependence on her brother by performing her childlike habit of hooking her hand into his waistband, Lune "glides ahead of us all, her stride is high, the balance of her body undisturbed" (Owuor 2019: 102). In the patriarchal context of the text, when one's sister and fiancée resort to prostitution to rescue the family, then, the male head of the family is, in every practical and symbolic sense, dead, for their sacrifice represents the failure and/or incapacity of the man to safeguard and provide for his kin. But Lune's behavior, which stands in contrast with Chi-Chi's, implies something more than just shadowy morality and the sense of guilt. Lune gliding ahead of the others (instead of following others, in particular Boniface) with an undisturbed stride and body balance gives an impression of determination in taking the place of Boniface as the head of the family and a certain detachment. It could imply that she has made a decision and is resolutely moving forward with it, regardless of how others might perceive it or the moral implications it may have.

Considering the hardships, Lune's actions here are open to interpretation in terms of morality. Her secret decision can be interpreted as something that she believes is necessary given the dire circumstances. But it could also be seen as crossing ethical boundaries, as done by Boniface. In this dilemma, Lune has resolved to take matters into her own hands and embarks on a course of action that involves further interaction with the UNHCR officers or something else that could be morally dubious in an attempt to navigate the complex and harrowing situation.

This ethical choice of hers is a difficult one to make for anyone. Despite her instant resolution, Lune still struggles for quite a long time. During that period, she buys a large mirror, in front of which she, practicing her familiar ballerina steps, attempts to distance herself from her own violation while in memory of her wonderful years. Not until the mirror is broken by Boniface does she eventually resort to prostitution, albeit with a self-justifying mindset, as described in the following passage:

> "Chéri, we can leave soon, but it depends on a certain…co-operation."
>
> "Co-operation?"
>
> "A condition from the medical examination."
>
> Agnethe looks away. Chi-Chi clutches her body, staving off in her way something she is afraid of.
>
> "How do we co-operate?" I am afraid to know.
>
> "By agreeing to be examined", she laughs, high, dry, cough-laugh, "… examined by the officials at their homes for a night."
>
> "I see." I don't. Silence. Agnethe is rocking herself to and fro. She is moaning a song. I know the tune. It is from the song new widows sing when the body of their dead spouse is laid on a bier. (Ibid 103)

His mother's song alludes to the symbolic, if not literal, disintegration or death of the family. Meanwhile

Lune attempts to mitigate her guilt by dropping hints to Boniface, interpreting his nonchalant "I see" as tacit consent. Her deluded sense of permission allows her to continue, even performing a mock ballet as if resigning herself to this new, sordid "stage" life has thrust upon her. This choice not only fractures her relationship with Boniface but also chips away at her own dignity.

Lune, like Chi-Chi, eventually resorts to prostitution to obtain immigration documents after announcing her intention to him. Boniface, still thinking that this crosses a moral line, responds by biting her on the cheek. His reaction lays bare his internal turmoil of love, pain, and indignation. But more importantly, it bespeaks his incapability of sloughing off his ethical standards that are no longer functional. Lune, on the other hand, is already determined to move toward a new ethical (or ethic-less) horizon that would enable her to survive the present hardship.

In the wake of the tragedy, the characterization of Lune and Boniface further evolves. After the deaths of Chi-Chi and Agnethe, Lune seeks forgiveness from Boniface ("Forgive me" [Owuor 2019: 112]), but the answer she receives from him is a slap "harder than necessary on the cheek upon which another man's cologne had strayed and stayed" (Ibid). In return, Lune "smirks" and says, "I'm leaving. I am living" (Ibid). Her response hints at a newfound detachment. Her sole focus becomes escaping Kenya for Canada, even if it means leaving Boniface behind. The letters that she sends to Boniface from Canada after emigration and which reads "Chéri, please, let me know the date of your arrival" (Ibid 113) or "when is your flight arriving?" (Ibid 114) reveal a lingering hope for connection on the part of Lune, but also a sense of isolation engendered by Boniface's delaying taking action. Her choices seem to lead to the loss of what once mattered most, painting her as a tragic figure torn between self-preservation and loyalty.

Boniface and Lune's story forces us to grapple with complex ethical questions. Is her prostitution a desperate act of survival or a betrayal of family and love? This question is reminiscent of a scene in the 2006 film *The Lives of Others* [German: *Das Leben der Anderen*]: Georg Dreyman is a writer living in poverty, pain and humiliation. To protect herself and him, his actress girlfriend is forced to have sex by the Minister of Culture. When Dreyman begs her not to sleep with the powerful man, she says: "I'm not going to sleep with a person. I'm being raped by the whole system. Are you very principled? What's the difference between you writing those flattering scripts and me sleeping with them?" This also applies to Owuor's story: what's the difference between men's emasculation in front of social pressure beyond their control and women sleeping with so-called authority? Such a comparison deepens the moral quandary. Just as Dreyman's girlfriend feels violated by the system, Lune might view her actions as a sacrifice to a cruel societal structure. At the same time, in my opinion, Lune grows to be a strong-willed survivor, or, in the words of Susannah Radstone, "a subject on his or her way, a subject 'becoming', a subject characterized, indeed, by this forward movement towards becoming someone identical with yet markedly different from his or her former self"(Radstone 2006: 171).

Boniface's once-protective and loving stance towards Lune is marred by his inability to understand her actions, while Lune's ethical boundaries are blurred as she tries to navigate a system that has failed them. Their relationship, once based on trust and affection, is now a complex web of survival-driven decisions, moral quandaries, and the struggle to maintain one's dignity in the face of overwhelming corruption. Just as in the example from "The Lives of Others", Lune views her actions as a sacrifice to a cruel societal structure, while Boniface's inability to empathize with her situation showcases the narrowing of his ethical empathy under the

influence of the institutional and collective depravity.

4. Ripple Effect of Collective and Institutional Depravity on Personal Relationships

In "Weight of Whispers," the narrative unfolds a tragic and multi-layered tale of Boniface's life as a refugee, peeling back the curtain on a complex web of moral, social, and institutional breakdowns. Boniface, who once inhabited the realm of an aristocratic identity, is abruptly and forcefully thrust into an entirely new world. In this foreign and unforgiving environment, his moral conduct is completely redefined by his refugee status. This seismic transition does not merely deconstruct his noble past but also positions him in a precarious situation where fulfilling his moral obligations as a son, brother, and fiancé morphs into an almost insurmountable task.

The root cause of Boniface's inability to provide support to his family is deeply embedded in the systemic violence and neglect that are systematically perpetuated by Kenyan institutions. These institutions, through their wanton and arbitrary power-wielding, reveal a blatant and disturbing callousness towards ethical dilemmas. The immigration officers's unabashed extortion, where they use their position of power to squeeze out money from vulnerable refugees like Boniface, and the sexual exploitation carried out by UNHCR officials are not just isolated and random acts. Instead, they are prime and harrowing examples of a much larger, underlying institutional depravity. This depravity is a manifestation of a deep-seated systemic rot that has permeated these institutions. It violates the most fundamental moral and justice principles, effectively creating an environment where the vulnerable, such as Boniface's family, are left completely at the mercy of an unjust and unforgiving system. The exploitation and abuse they endure distort the very essence of what a just society should be, where every individual, regardless of their background or circumstances, should be treated with dignity and fairness.

Adding fuel to this moral and justice crisis is the public's apathy towards the Kuseremane family's plight. In a society where people have become so accustomed to turning a blind eye to the suffering of others, the lack of empathy at both the institutional and collective levels slowly but surely erodes the moral fabric that holds society together. This phenomenon is vividly and poignantly illustrated when Boniface runs along the road to a hospital, his mother in his arms. The evening traffic continues its ceaseless flow, and passers-by, without so much as a glance or a moment of concern, go about their business. The statements, "I carry my mother and run along the road. The evening traffic courses past. Nairobi accommodates. Room for idiosyncrasies. So to those pass by, it is not strange that a tall, tall man should carry a slender woman in his arms." (Owuor 2019: 106) and "On the streets, as before, no one found it strange, the idea of a tall, tall man carrying a slender woman in his arms. A pattern had been established, a specific madness accommodated." (Ibid 111) serve as powerful reminders of the normalization of indifference. People in this society have become so desensitized to the unusual and the distressing that they no longer feel any inclination to intervene or even offer the most basic form of human compassion.

Scheler's "Prinzip der Solidarität aller sittlichen Wesen" (Principle of the Solidarity of All Moral Beings) puts forward the noble idea that each person is morally responsible for all others (Scheler 1973: 166). In theory, this principle promotes a sense of unity and collective well-being, a vision of a society where everyone looks out for one another. However, in the harsh and unforgiving realities of Boniface's Kenyan society, this appears to be a rather idealistic concept. Even in a world where institutions are corrupt and the public is indifferent, most

people would like to think that a just society should not be hostile or indifferent to the plight of others. Yet, the actions of both the institutions and the public in "Weight of Whispers" tell a very different and disheartening story.

Boniface, who began his journey with a strong ethical foundation, undergoes a profound and significant transformation as he endures the relentless institutional abuse. In a society that offers him little support, he becomes increasingly self-focused as a survival mechanism. His failure to compare his own maltreatment with the experiences of Lune and Chi-Chi at the hands of UNHCR officials is a telling sign of his growing self-absorption. His once-steady moral compass now wavers, leading him to take desperate and uncharacteristic measures such as using a a false identity when threatened by the immigration officer. The collective and institutional depravity gradually eats away at his willpower, causing his empathy for his family, which was once so strong, to wane. The once-tight-knit family bonds start to fray, and his attitude towards his mother, in particular, becomes one of growing indifference.

The collective and institutional depravity gives birth to an unsympathetic society. In this society, people, in their constant struggle for survival, become self-centered, as exemplified by the case of the Indian shopkeeper. In such an environment, the ability to empathize with others, even family members, diminishes. Boniface's beating of his sister and his fiancée, mirroring the violence he endured from the police, is a tragic and heart-rending consequence of the lack of empathy. The story of Boniface and his family serves as a powerful and cautionary tale, highlighting how the contamination of personal ethics by collective and institutional depravity can lead to a society where the bonds of family and community are severely tested. It forces us to confront the harsh and unvarnished realities of a world where moral values are often sacrificed at the altar of power, self-interest, and indifference. This narrative is not just about Boniface's personal journey but also serves as a mirror reflecting the larger societal ills that need to be addressed and rectified.

5. Conclusion

"Weight of Whispers" delves into the complex ethical dilemmas refugees face in a Kenyan society plagued by institutional corruption and moral decline. Through Boniface and his family's story, the narrative vividly depicts the profound impact on their lives and moral compasses.

On a personal front, Boniface struggles with guilt over his inability to protect his family. His relationships with his mother, sister, and fiancée are strained due to tough choices and tragic events. The women in the family also confront their own ethical battles, such as Agnethe's fight for dignity in exile, Chi-Chi's sacrifice, and Lune's morally ambiguous survival decisions.

In the broader context, the story reveals the unethical behavior of institutions. European and American embassies' indifference, the immigration officer's discrimination, the Kenyan police's dehumanizing actions, and the UNHCR's sexual exploitation all contribute to the refugees' suffering. The interplay between individual and institutional ethical misconducts forms a central theme, creating a vicious cycle.

Owuor uses this narrative to evoke "an unsettlement [...] that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim" (LaCapra 1997: 267), as described by Dominik LaCapra. Set against the Rwandan genocide, the story re-evaluates Kenya. It serves as a critique of societal structures, calling for a re-examination of ethics

and a more just world. As Nanjala Nyabola noted, "Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor has established herself as the sharpest and most lyrical chronicler of the national condition." (Nyabola 2020) This can be even evidenced by her "Weight of Whispers", though often considered as a Rwandan genocide narrative.

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