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NEITHER HERE NOR THERE: HYBRIDITY, CULTURAL ALIENATION, AND RETURN MIGRATION IN RUTANGYE CRYSTAL BUTUNGI'S "LEGAL ALIEN"

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The political instability that engulfed Uganda during the regime of Idi Amin (1971–1979) triggered one of the largest waves of migration in the country's history. Thousands of Ugandans fled the nation in search of safety and economic security, settling in countries such as Australia, the United States, and Britain. Although the fall of Amin's regime encouraged many families to return, reintegration into the homeland proved far more complicated than anticipated, particularly for children who had spent their formative years abroad. These returnees often found themselves trapped between two worlds, belonging fully to neither. Rutangye Crystal Butungi's short story "Legal Alien" explores this dilemma through the experiences of an unnamed young girl who returns to Uganda after spending her childhood in Australia. Through the lens of postcolonial theories of hybridity, diaspora, and cultural belonging, the story demonstrates that citizenship alone cannot guarantee acceptance within a national community. Instead, identity emerges as a contested and negotiated process shaped by language, culture, memory, and social recognition.

The title of the story itself encapsulates the central paradox that structures the narrative. The term "legal alien" generally refers to a foreign resident who legally inhabits a country. Butungi inverts this meaning. The narrator is legally Ugandan, yet she is perceived as an outsider within her own homeland. Her condition illustrates the tension between legal citizenship and cultural belonging. As Benedict Anderson argues, nations function as "imagined communities" whose members are bound together through shared cultural practices and collective identities rather than mere legal frameworks. Although the narrator possesses Ugandan citizenship, she lacks the cultural markers that would enable her inclusion within this imagined national community. Consequently, she becomes an alien in the very country to which she officially belongs.

The narrator's first day at school functions as a symbolic initiation into this experience of exclusion. Having spent the first nine years of her life in Australia, she enters a Ugandan classroom expecting an educational environment similar to the one she previously knew. Instead, she encounters an overcrowded room containing more than one hundred students, lacking many of the facilities she had taken for granted. Her astonishment at the absence of refrigerators, microwaves, carpets, and play areas immediately distinguishes her from her classmates. Through this contrast, Butungi highlights the gulf separating the narrator's Australian upbringing from the social realities of contemporary Uganda.

More importantly, the school functions as a disciplinary institution that seeks to mould individuals according to dominant social norms. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, one may argue that the narrator possesses a set of cultural dispositions acquired through her Australian upbringing. These dispositions shape her expectations regarding personal space, classroom organization, student-teacher relationships, and individual freedom. Upon entering the Ugandan educational system, however, she discovers that her habitus is fundamentally incompatible with the social environment surrounding her. Her classmates perceive her behaviour not as normal but as strange, excessive, and even arrogant. The resulting cultural mismatch transforms the classroom into a site of conflict where competing systems of values collide.

The issue of school uniform further intensifies the narrator's sense of alienation. In Australia, she enjoyed the freedom to wear clothing of her choice, whereas in Uganda she must conform to a rigid dress code. What appears ordinary to local students becomes oppressive for someone accustomed to a more flexible educational culture. The uniform symbolizes the broader demand for conformity imposed upon the returnee child. She is expected to suppress the habits and values acquired abroad in order to assimilate into the local social order. Yet such assimilation remains difficult because her sense of self has already been shaped by another cultural environment.

The narrator's encounter with Daisy provides one of the clearest examples of social othering within the story. When she attempts to sit beside her classmates, Daisy physically distances herself, avoiding contact with the newcomer. This seemingly insignificant gesture carries profound symbolic significance. It marks the narrator as different and undesirable, positioning her outside the boundaries of social acceptance. Edward Said's theory of othering helps illuminate this dynamic. Communities often construct their identities by identifying and excluding those who appear different. Although the narrator shares the same nationality as her classmates, her accent, behaviour, and cultural assumptions render her foreign in their eyes. Consequently, she becomes an object of both suspicion and fascination.

Indeed, the classmates' responses to the narrator are deeply ambivalent. While they mock her ignorance of local customs, they are equally intrigued by her foreign background. Their questions regarding Eddie Murphy reveal this fascination. Assuming that she comes from America, they expect her to possess intimate knowledge of a famous African American celebrity. Such assumptions reveal the influence of global media and popular culture on Ugandan youth. More significantly, however, the conversation demonstrates how the narrator's identity is continuously scrutinized and questioned. She must repeatedly explain who she is, where she comes from, and whether she possesses the right to claim Ugandan identity. National belonging becomes something that must constantly be performed and defended.

Language serves as another crucial marker of inclusion and exclusion. Throughout the story, the narrator struggles to communicate in Luganda, the local language. Her inability to speak fluently repeatedly exposes her foreignness. Language functions not merely as a means of communication but also as a symbolic marker of cultural membership. Those who speak the language are recognized as insiders, while those who do not remain perpetually suspect. Even after spending years in Uganda, the narrator fails to achieve complete linguistic fluency. Her continued dependence on English reinforces her outsider status and prevents full integration into the social fabric of the community. In this sense, language becomes a gatekeeping mechanism through which national identity is regulated and enforced.

The story also demonstrates how institutions employ discipline and punishment to enforce conformity. This is particularly evident when the narrator receives corporal punishment from her teacher. Having grown up in Australia, where such practices are prohibited, she experiences the incident as deeply traumatic. Ironically, however, the beating also becomes the moment when her classmates finally accept her. Their sympathy emerges from the recognition of a shared experience. Because they themselves have routinely endured corporal punishment, they view the narrator's suffering as evidence of her initiation into their world. Acceptance, therefore, comes at a significant cost. She gains social recognition only after being subjected to the same disciplinary structures that govern everyone else. The episode reveals the complex and often painful processes through which belonging is negotiated within communities.

From a postcolonial perspective, the narrator's predicament can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity. The protagonist occupies a liminal position between cultures. She is neither entirely Australian nor entirely Ugandan. Instead, she inhabits what Bhabha describes as a “Third Space,” a zone of cultural negotiation where identities remain fluid and unstable. Her Australian experiences prevent complete assimilation into Ugandan society, yet her racial and familial ties distinguish her from white Australians as well. This in-between condition generates a profound sense of displacement that shapes every aspect of her life.

As the narrative progresses, the narrator increasingly embraces her outsider status. Although she learns certain cultural practices such as kneeling before elders, cooking with firewood, and performing domestic chores, these acts never produce a genuine sense of belonging. Instead, she perceives them as attempts to domesticate and regulate her behaviour. The more she is encouraged to adapt, the more intensely she desires escape. Uganda remains her legal home, but emotionally she continues to identify with Australia.

The climax of the story occurs against the backdrop of the “Walk to Work” protests that erupted across Uganda in response to rising living costs and economic hardship. While much of the nation becomes consumed by political turmoil, the narrator remains largely indifferent. Her primary concern is securing a visa that will enable her return to Australia. This indifference reflects the culmination of years of alienation. Unlike her parents, who once fled Uganda out of necessity, she chooses departure as an act of self-realization. For her, Australia represents not merely a geographical destination but an emotional homeland where her identity will no longer be questioned.

Ultimately, “Legal Alien” exposes the limitations of viewing identity through the narrow framework of citizenship and nationality. Through the experiences of its protagonist, the story reveals how belonging is constructed through everyday cultural practices, linguistic competence, social recognition, and emotional attachment. The narrator's legal status cannot protect her from exclusion because she lacks the cultural credentials required for acceptance. Existing between two worlds, she embodies the complex realities of

postcolonial migration and return. Butungi's story thus challenges essentialist notions of nationhood and demonstrates that home is not always where one is born. Rather, home is the place where one's identity is recognized, affirmed, and allowed to flourish.

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