Statistical Footnotes or Suffering Human Beings? Humanizing AIDS in Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*

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Introduction

While previous Ugandan AIDS writing focussed on statistics and a cautionary tale motif designed to disclose the impact and/or control of the spread of the disease, in an era where AIDS has come to be considered almost a common disease, a new rubric of representation has emerged. In this essay, I acknowledge the efficacy of the dual motif of earlier Ugandan AIDS writing that either foregrounded statistics or deployed an instructive tale to provide useful insights into the AIDS pandemic. Moving beyond this frame, however, I suggest that fiction generally, and Moses Isegawa's novel, *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2001) specifically, offer an alternative mode of writing and/or reading AIDS tales through the use of setting and characterization modulated by third-person narration. Here, the novel's depiction of AIDS gestures to Ugandan oral literature where folktales and fables do more than simply present fabulous tales. Comparable to Ugandan fables and folktales that center on 'the ogre likely to devour the hero/heroine' in order to teach lessons against certain practices and actions, *Abyssinian Chronicles* features AIDS-infected and -affected characters to showcase AIDS in its various complexities and also uses storytelling as a therapy analogous to Aristotle's concept of catharsis.

In this regard, it can be argued that *Abyssinian Chronicles* explains, persuades, justifies and at times calls upon its readers to contemplate an unorthodox sensitivity towards the disease and its impact on society and individuals (Hanne 1994). Thus, Isegawa's novel foregrounds how fiction and narratives can provide an alternate and insightful rendition of the AIDS pandemic. Unlike scientific knowledge that focuses on facts, fictional explorations of AIDS personalize the engagement. For example, Isegawa's technique of depicting Uncle Kawayida's psychological torment and Aunt Lwandeka's corporeal deterioration on account of AIDS provides us with a holistically profound insight into the disease and its impact on individuals and society. The novel, liberated from the focus on statistical and scientific facts about the disease, deftly employs a third-person narrator who places two characters — Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka — at different times and geographical settings of the pandemic to disclose some of the complex and multifaceted contours of AIDS in Ugandan society.

Abyssinian Chronicles is an important postcolonial Ugandan novel that imaginatively reflects on various facets of Uganda's post-independence reality. This perhaps explains why Andrew H Armstrong (2009), Brenda Cooper (2008) and Jacqui Jones (2000) read it as a political novel that explores the corporeal and intimate impact of power on the individual and the communal body. For example, Armstrong argues that the novel stretches "the limits of 'factual' and historical credulity, reminding the reader that [… it is] in fact a work of historical fabrication that faithfully depicts the Ugandan condition under Idi Amin" (Armstrong 128). He explains that the novel performs the above role because it "recasts and re-enacts a period of recent Ugandan history marked by violence and chaos, emanating from Idi Amin's dictatorship" (Armstrong 128). I agree with Armstrong's (2009), Cooper's (2008) and Jones' (2000) reading of *Abyssinian Chronicles* as a political novel that, among other issues, addresses the ghost of Idi Amin in Ugandan public discourses and the corporeality of his regime's dispensation of brutal force and power on the Ugandan body politic. This is particularly evident in the seven chronicles — "1971 Village Days"; "The City"; "Amin, The Godfather"; "Seminary Days"; "Nineteen Seventy-Nine"; "Triangular Revelations" and "Ghettoblaster," — into which the plot of the narrative is sub-divided. However, one of the chronicles of the novel — 'Triangular Revelations' — extends the textual analysis of Amin's legacy in Uganda by using characterization, setting and focalization to explore the theme of AIDS during the post-Amin era in the country.

Isegawa's characters, Uncle Kawayida, who suffers a double tragedy of losing his wife to AIDS and societal discrimination in rural Uganda (Rakai) at the start of the AIDS pandemic, and Aunt Lwandeka, who corporeally disintegrates in the slums of the capital city Kampala, highlight individual confrontations with AIDS. Isegawa's depiction of Uncle Kawayida's psychological turmoil and Aunt Lwandeka's physical deterioration places his text into conversation with a significant Ugandan AIDS archive. These are texts, to quote Marc Epprecht, that attempt to explain "the unprecedented rates of HIV infection and the fact that men and women appeared to be equally affected" in Uganda (Epprecht 1). In *Heterosexual Africa: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*, Epprecht highlights the point that the elision of homosexuality in African discourse in the age of AIDS was bound to exacerbate the catastrophic impact of AIDS on the continent. This is because the exclusion of a significant sub-stratum of the continent's population would distort the African AIDS reality. I apply Epprecht's point that all facets and/or populations affected by AIDS should be included in AIDS discourses in order to provide a complete and realistic picture of Ugandan experiences with the disease. Specifically, I argue that fictional texts provide profound insights into

the disease and its impact on society. Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*, Philly Lutaaya's "Alone and Frightened" (1989), All Stars' "A Little Bit of Love" (2006), Bakayimbira's *Ndiwulira* (1992), Karooro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* (1994) and Ugandan Ministry of Education's *Hydra* (1988) are comparable because they engage with important questions, namely, what is AIDS and how best its impact on individuals and society can be addressed. The above questions remind us of Epprecht's (2008) postulation of the availability of multi-dimensional aspects of the disease. The multi-dimensional nature of AIDS narratives applies to the Ugandan case if one were to consider the various idioms deployed in these discourses. For example, Ugandan AIDS texts such as Bakayimbira's *Ndiwulira* (1992), Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* (1994), Philly Lutaaya's "Alone and Frightened" (1989) and All Stars' "A Little Bit of Love" (2006) deploy a cautionary tale motif in their respective texts to engage with this theme.

Unlike the above-mentioned Ugandan writers who utilize an admonitory trope to explain Ugandan AIDS experiences, Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* fuses setting with focalization to unravel individual and personalized perceptions of the disease. I argue that the difference in chronicling AIDS between the cautionary storytellers and those who foreground corporeality in the framing of AIDS lies in how the heroes or heroines of the narrative are portrayed in terms of how they acquire AIDS, how they suffer through it and, more importantly, how their experience teaches society about AIDS. The register of Ugandan AIDS storytellers reminds us of Susan Sontag's argument that AIDS is "regularly described as invading society and efforts to reduce mortality […] as a fight, a war" (10). The double image of an invaded body/society and war that Sontag underscores resonates with the plot of most Ugandan AIDS writings. The use of an AIDS narrative for informational purposes in a behavioral change framework is destabilized in Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*. I argue that Isegawa provides an alternative engagement with the disease that helps unearth the corporeal and psychic reality of the disease. His writing of AIDS helps to answer the question: how does an ordinary man or woman understand and deal with AIDS? This is perhaps why Isegawa extends the controlling metaphor of his novel — "abyss" — to the AIDS narrative. This allows the story to focus on an individual's experience of the disease rather than using him/her as an instrument of behavioral change.[1]

Isegawa's contextualized rendition of AIDS offers alternative knowledges about the disease. For example, whereas Epprecht and other Euro-American scholars concentrate on how AIDS narratives offer information about, and logical explanations of, the disease, Isegawa's contribution lies in his personalization of the AIDS narrative. His spatial and temporal setting and characterization

"Ugandanize" the AIDS story in a way that makes it different from the American AIDS narratives theorized by Sontag and Epprecht. For example, Epprecht (2008) notes the difference between the manifestations of American and African AIDS pandemics. He argues that not only are the strains of AIDS ravaging America and Africa differently, but he also contends that the disease affects different categories of people on the two continents (Epprecht 1-2). The case in point is that while homosexual men have endured the brunt of the pandemic in America, in Africa AIDS is a disease for both men and women.[2] As interesting as Epprecht's deconstruction of American and African AIDS experiences is, I argue that Isegawa's novel does more than broadly deconstruct the Ugandan AIDS context. This is because *Abyssinian Chronicles* documents an example of an African AIDS story that is complex and opens up various facets of the pandemic to readers, including the agency of the victims. At a time when AIDS was a death sentence, the agency and grace of Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka offers an alternative version of how to relate to the disease that is contrary to the image of abjection that was in circulation at the time. This perhaps justifies the treatment of AIDS as one of the abysses that the title of the text alludes to, as is eloquently explained by the protagonist's father, Serenity. Serenity muses that "Uganda was a land of false bottoms where under every abyss there was another one waiting to ensnare people, and that the historians had made a mistake: Abyssinia was not the ancient land of Ethiopia, but modern Uganda" (Isegawa 469). Along with Cooper (2008), Jones (2000) and Armstrong (2009), I have previously argued that the metaphor of the abyss references the corporeal and psychological suffering occasioned by Idi Amin's dictatorship and its infliction of state power on the Ugandan body politic in the 1970s. However, in this article, I argue that "abyss" in the title can also be read as a synecdoche for the horribly unimaginable reality of AIDS that the novel unravels.

In what follows, I explore how Isegawa's focalization and setting allow him to enact an alternative AIDS narrative. This reading spotlights the illocutionary power of and/or a fictional text's ability to project an intimate understanding of what it means to be infected, suffering from or having a relative or friend suffering from AIDS. This is because the text's experientially corporeal and mental registers enable Isegawa to draw a subtle and nuanced picture of AIDS-inflicted suffering. Although Isegawa, like many Ugandan commentators on AIDS, often slips into attempts to explain the mysterious nature of the disease and the outlandish response to it by an undiscerning and perplexed society, his choice of, and detailed depiction of, Uncle Kawayida's psychological anguish and Aunt Lwandeka's corporeal deterioration allows his novel to offer an alternative analysis of the pandemic. The text's placement of the personalized AIDS experiences of Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka at different geographical

locations and at different times in the Ugandan AIDS trajectory enables *Abyssinian Chronicles* to present a powerful and credible fictionalized rendition of the pandemic. I argue that Isegawa's portrayal of Uncle Kawayida's and Aunt Lwandeka's trials with the disease allows him to underline the agency and grace of his AIDS-suffering characters and engage readers in an empathetic and/or affective identification with the two suffering characters.

Isegawa's Decoding of the AIDS Mystery

It is important to note that Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* deploys an innovative narrative motif to chronicle AIDS at a time, to quote Susan Sontag, when "AIDS was envisaged as an alien 'other' as enemies are in war and the move from the demonization of the disease to the attribution of fault on the patient" (10). The othering of AIDS and its sufferers that Sontag underlines above has particular resonance with the African AIDS narrative. First, this is because the continent's AIDS experience is unlike its American and European versions. Whereas in America and Europe, AIDS affected a fringe community of men who had sex with men, in Africa it devastated the heterosexual family structure. Second is the fact that AIDS conjures up colonial stereotypes about African sexuality. This othering of the African AIDS victim implicitly suggested that AIDS was self-inflicted, if not deserved and expected. The stereotypic prism coheres with ignorance and the mystery associated with the disease to craft a quintessentially Ugandan AIDS narrative. This is perhaps why *Abyssinian Chronicles* is comparable to most Ugandan AIDS narrative in that it attempts to define AIDS and demystify its source. For example, the protagonist notes that "judging by the sneaky way it operated — recurrent fevers, rashes, blisters — it looked like witchcraft" (Isegawa 423). In the above passage, Isegawa dates the disease, describes its outward and visible symptoms and underscores its catastrophic impact on society. He uses affective adjectives and exaggerations to show how the disease wastes the sufferers. Here, we recall Sontag's metaphors of war and invasion in the depiction of AIDS. Adjectives like "slimmed," "recurrent fevers," "rashes," "blister" and the hyperbolic "started killing in big numbers" underline the corporeal impact of AIDS as an invasion.

The corporeal impact of AIDS is amplified by the nomenclature given to AIDS. Phrases like "mysterious disease" and "slim" maintain the ephemeral nature of the disease. This sense is aptly captured in the passage that AIDS remained "[s]lim to us [… and it] gave a completely new slant to the theory that war is always followed by other disasters" (Isegawa 423). The quotation above captures the dominant discourses around AIDS in the 1980s. The disease's mysterious nature did not only give it the descriptive nomenclature "slim," but it also

produced many explanations of the causes of the disease. One of the explanations was that it was one of the unintended consequences of war. Another interesting explanation of the cause of AIDS was witchcraft, which is gestured to by Isegawa's observation that AIDS was sorcery meted out as punishment "by Tanzanian smugglers who had been cheated by their Ugandan counterparts in the seventies and eighties when smuggling was rife in those marshy areas" (Isegawa 423). Here, Isegawa utilizes a common perception in the Ugandan polity that often attributes mysterious and unexplainable phenomena to, on the one hand, witchcraft. And on the other, he amplifies the unmatched prowess of Tanzanian sorcery in the Ugandan imaginary. Tanzanian sorcery becomes a decipherable lexicon by a society grappling to make sense of a phenomenon outside their frame of reference. The quotation also underlines a writer weighed down by the anxiety to name and demystify a disease. The version of AIDS as some powerful witchcraft inflicted on sufferers for a multitude of reasons was the main explanation of the cause of the disease in the 1980s and 1990s. This explanation resonates with the awe, mystery and irrationality associated with AIDS in Uganda and the entire Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s.

It is important to note that Isegawa structures the genesis, spread and attributes of AIDS as a preamble to his two fictional examples of AIDS-affected persons, namely, Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka. This point is underlined by the fact that Uncle Kawayida's experience of AIDS in Rakai at the start of the pandemic comes immediately after Isegawa's attempted demystification of the disease. Isegawa's reliance on a special diction to articulate AIDS conjures up Judith Butler's (2004) supposition that lucid registers are important in framing public grieving and/or understanding of AIDS and Susan Sontag's (1978; 1988) explanation that some diseases invite metaphorical thinking. Sontag's argument that diseases like AIDS and cancer whose causality is murky and treatment ineffectual attract metaphors of war (such as the invasion and the fight of the dreaded corruption, decay, anomie, and weakness) resonates with Butler's postulation that lucid registers are important in AIDS discourses. Butler argues that in the initial years of the AIDS crisis in the US, "the public vigils and the Name Projects broke through the public shame [barriers] associated with dying from AIDS" (Butler 39). Although Butler is concerned with shame associated with dying from AIDS, Sontag, along with Simon Gikandi and Evans Mwangi, underline the exclusive and instrumentalizing metaphors that suffering from AIDS invites. This argument is captured by Gikandi's and Mwangi's argument that AIDS narratives constructed the disease as "a form of punishment in the [respective] text's moral scheme" (Gikandi and Mwangi 23). The thread that joins Sontag's, Butler's, Gikandi's and Mwangi's theorization of AIDS is that metaphor and register are important representational tools in AIDS

discourses. I argue that the representational effectiveness of metaphor and diction in AIDS discourses is deployed by Isegawa in his writing of AIDS in *Abyssinian Chronicles* interestingly because his novel foregrounds affective and empathetic diction and metaphors in order to humanize AIDS sufferers.

In a sense, Isegawa's narration of Uncle Kawayida's and Aunt Lwandeka's AIDS stories purposely use a particular diction characterized by corporeally grotesque realism to move readers to not only "recognise and alleviate [the] suffering" of the Ugandan 'victim' of the disease (Berlant 4), but also to recall the steep price AIDS inflicts on individuals and societies. The text's empathetically graphic representation evokes sentiments comparable to Butler's concepts of "Public Vigils" and "Names Project" and Sontag's ideas of metaphorical depiction of dreaded and incomprehensible diseases in making legible the corporeal and psychic impact of AIDS. Although Butler and Sontag foreground American sub-societies — homosexuals and Afro-Americans— that were oppressed and subjugated under Reagan's neo-liberal dispensation, their arguments can be brought to bear on Isegawa's writing in *Abyssinian Chronicles*. Granted, Isegawa's Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka are not comparable to African-American homosexuals of the 1990s. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Uncle Kawayida's and Aunt Lwandeka's eccentricity and free-spiritedness places them on the margins of Ugandan society that demands conformity and deference to authority. This is perhaps why Isegawa uses imagery and rhetorical devices that foreground Uncle Kawayida's mental anguish and Aunt Lwandeka's corporeal wasting because of AIDS in order to memorialize their experiences of AIDS.

These textual anchors recall Agar's argument that through language and narrative construction "literature contributes to the very essence of what AIDS is, what we understand by it, how we live (with or without) it […] texts cease to be simply cultural interventions, while reading itself becomes a form of cultural (political) intervention into the reality of what positively constitutes our world" (Agar 8-9). The essence of Agar's argument is that writing underlines both the advocacy and affective essence of AIDS. It is plausible to argue that Agar's concept of affective advocacy is a thread that runs through Ugandan AIDS writing referred to in the introduction of this article. These texts deploy a Ugandan oral literary idiom — a cautionary tale motif that recurs in the nation's folktales and fables — to weave texts that provide facts and caution readers from getting infected with AIDS. However, Isegawa breaks with this tradition by creating a tale that affectively connects readers to the characters who have the misfortune of either being affected or infected with the disease. Isegawa's portrayal of AIDS sufferers such as Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka does more than state facts about the disease. Their depiction

cultivates our empathy and understanding of the sufferers. This is because their depiction in the novel underlines their blamelessness in the contraction of AIDS, but more importantly, it underlines their agency in doing everything in their power to survive the disease.

Surviving and/or Living with AIDS in *Abyssinian Chronicles*

That Isegawa utilizes structure, plot, focalization and setting to craft a convincing AIDS narrative is illustrated by his depiction of Uncle Kawayida's case. It is important to note that Uncle Kawayida's experiences with AIDS, as empathically revealed by the narrator, are set in the early years of the AIDS pandemic and in the rural area of Rakai.[3] Uncle Kawayida is perhaps the most colorful character in *Abyssinian Chronicles* and is reduced to a bubbling fool when his most beloved wife, Naaki, is stricken by the disease. The narrator observes that "every change in her appearance cut Uncle like a razor. […] The affliction threatened to devalue all the great times they had and to poison love with doubt, regret and terror" (Isegawa 429). The language in the above passage highlights his helplessness and hopelessness when he comes face-to-face with AIDS. His endearing charm, resilience, cosmopolitan outlook and easy demeanour crumble when Naaki is infected with AIDS. The transformation of Uncle Kawayida recalls Ross Chambers's argument that AIDS narratives are testimonial. He clarifies that "for the text to work as testimony, it falls on the reader to carry the weight of the act of witnessing. This is, then, a personal situation for each and every reader to confront" (quoted in Agar 8-9). Isegawa skilfully uses language to position readers as witnesses to Uncle Kawayida's mental turmoil. Expressions like 'cut like a razor,' 'poison love with doubt' and "terror" work to present an image of a man who is helpless before the suffering of the woman he loves. The suffering is amplified by the realization that there is nothing he can do to save her nor can he understand why she is dying. For a man whom the reader is told adjusts easily to changing circumstances, it is disheartening to see him grapple to understand the inexplicable disease devastating a person whom he loves.

Here, we recall the controlling metaphor of the novel as explained by Moses Isegawa in an interview with Jacqui Jones. Isegawa explains that for him the word "abyss" has "something religious about it: damnation, going into the bowel of hell" (Jones 87). That AIDS as an abyss is a kind of "damnation" or "hell" with the Greco-Judean connotation that this term carries is not in dispute when related to the case of Uncle Kawayida. Uncle Kawayida is not only living in hell because he has lost his beloved Naaki, but also because her death raises many questions that he cannot answer. The narrator observes that "uncle was devastated. The spotlight was firmly on him: when was he going? Was he sorry? Who was going to look after his

children" (Isegawa 429)? The above passage highlights the mental turmoil that he is subjected to. While the expression "devastated" highlights Uncle Kawayida's anguish given his circumstances, it is the three rhetorical questions that accentuate his pain and loss. Although losing a wife to a mysterious disease is devastating in itself, his pain is accentuated by his orphaned children and the guilt that he is somehow responsible for her death. This recalls Gikandi's and Mwangi's (2007) and Sontag's (1988) respective arguments that often the AIDS sufferers were blamed for infection on account of their sexual promiscuity and/or preference. This conceptualization explains in part why Uncle Kawayida's in-laws accuse him of murdering his wife. They believe that the "so called *mutego* – an incurable, evil spell which had the power to kill the perpetrator and his entire family" is Uncle Kawayida's fault (Isegawa 428).

That Uncle Kawayida is capable of surmounting this huge burden – "he faced trails like a man and went about his business as usual" (Isegawa 429) – is another facet of the AIDS narrative that Isegawa showcases. Isegawa's focalization of Uncle Kawayida allows him to reclaim his agency in a manner that debunks the popular imaginary of AIDS patients as victims. This is underlined by Uncle Kawayida's resilience in such a trying moment. He refuses to be treated as a statistical footnote to AIDS.[4] It is important to note that his resilience metamorphoses into one of the many Sub-Saharan African AIDS myths. Uncle Kawayida attributes his 'miraculous survival' to chicken soup as the narrator aptly observes: "they said it was chicken soup that had saved his family, and that it would save theirs too […] his ambition now was to save Kyotera, the whole of Rakai and Masaka, and the entire country" (430).[5] Although his claim is not based on scientific or medical fact, his single-minded endeavour to find a cure underscores the ingenuity, resilience and courage that Ugandans exhibited in the face of the disease. Uncle Kawayida's proposal may be irrational and dangerous, but it is not malicious and, therefore, represents the innovative ways that Ugandan society sought to overcome the AIDS pandemic. Given his tragic circumstances, readers appreciate what drives him to behave the way he does.

The effectiveness of Isegawa's AIDS writing rubric is characterized by the circularity of his depiction. While Isegawa opens his AIDS discourse with Uncle Kawayida's painful experiences in rural Uganda during the initial years of the pandemic, he closes it with an exploration of Aunt Lwandeka's corporeal devastation in an urban setting at the height of the pandemic. Aunt Lwandeka is comparable to Uncle Kawayida because, like the latter, she is the narrator's most favorite aunt on account of her resilience and colourful personality. Isegawa's documentation of Aunt Lwandeka's deterioration because of AIDS interrogates Simon Gikandi's and Evans Mwangi's postulation that many African writers "use the disease merely as a metaphor for

what is wrong with post-colonial society" (Gikandi and Mwangi 23) and Jacqui Jones' eloquent observation that "Isegawa ingeniously interweaves the personal narrative of his protagonist Mugezi with the larger-scale story of the country" (Jones 85). The core argument in the above passages is that writing a catastrophe like AIDS is always metaphorical, namely that the suffering character symbolizes the pain of society. Whereas there are many depictions of suffering and pain in *Abyssinian Chronicles,* such as domestic violence that allegorizes state dictatorship, Aunt Lwandeka's corporeal suffering because of AIDS is not symbolic of Ugandan postcolonial dystopia. Her suffering takes place after the end of political violence and dictatorship that coincide with the coming to power of the enlightened NRM government.[6] Isegawa's presentation of her plight highlights the uniqueness and singularity of her pain. This is because Isegawa uses her condition to showcase an individualized engagement with the disease. Isegawa's stylization, specifically his use of grim diction and imagery as subtle textual markers in depicting Aunt Lwandeka's suffering spotlights individual upheavals occasioned by AIDS.

By divorcing Aunt Lwandeka's suffering from an intersection between the personal and the national, Isegawa succeeds in constructing *Abyssinian Chronicles* as an AIDS narrative that underscores the corporeal as a way of scripting agency of the depicted sufferer of the disease. This is attuned to Martha Nussbaum's observations regarding the power of fiction in delineating suffering in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001) and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life,* (1995). She argues that a "society pursuing social justice might legitimately rely on and cultivate compassion" (Nussbaum 299). She also pertinently points out that "characters who are not facing any adversity simply do not hook us as readers" (Nussbaum 90). The two passages underline how literary narratives are different from medico-scientific discourses on diseases. Through the depiction of characters who are facing adversity and can be related to, a literary work can cultivate readers' compassion as a form of understanding. Nussbaum's argument that fiction cultivates compassion through vivid depiction of characters immersed in pain is applicable to the portrayal of Aunt Lwandeka in the novel. The text shows readers a character facing adversity in a manner that allows Isegawa to pursue social justice and cultivate compassion for victims of AIDS. Aunt Lwandeka demands our empathy because the text underlines her blamelessness in her acquisition and/or suffering from AIDS because she does not deserve the suffering. Furthermore, given her record, trials and tribulations during Uganda's violent history, she arouses our compassion because having sacrificed both for the nation and her extended family, her fate as an AIDS sufferer is disheartening.

This paradox is eloquently noted by Mugezi on the day of her wedding. Mugezi observes that he "was happy for Aunt. She seemed to have it all: money, fame, power, love. For a girl who had come to the city with nothing, she had risen to the top the hard way" (Isegawa 435). Although I have argued elsewhere that Mugezi is prone to exaggerations in his description of characters and events in the novel, the depiction of Aunt Lwandeka above is hardly an exaggeration. Indeed, Aunt Lwandeka is a self-made woman who has gone through a lot to achieve what she has. Having survived Idi Amin's terror machinery for receiving a letter from abroad and her clandestine recruitment and transportation of rebels to the 'bush' during Obote II's regime, she is in many ways a quintessential Ugandan heroine. Perhaps, in an Aristotelian twist of fate, her infection with AIDS and subsequent suffering and death are justifiable in order to accentuate her heroism. However, Mugezi's subtle observation that "things took another turn. Many people around the city were dying of slim" (Isegawa 437) reminds us of Joel Isabirye's comment about Philly Bongole Lutaaya's coming out as an AIDS patient in the late 1980s Uganda. Isabirye argues that Lutaaya's superstar status not only "gave a human face to living with AIDS [but also] helped to counter the perception of the disease as a monstrous thing, suggesting that even a city-based icon was not immune to problems that someone in the village could have" (Isabirye 29). Isegawa's and Isabirye's passages above underline two points about the depiction of Aunt Lwandeka's suffering in the novel. First, Isegawa's Aunt Lwandeka's story and Isabirye's comment on Lutaaya's experience in Ugandan AIDS discourses demonstrate that vivid characterization and/or celebrity status gives a human face to AIDS. Second, Philly Bongole Lutaaya's iconic stature, which arose out of his public confession of his AIDS status, helped mobilize consciousness around the pandemic. It could be argued that Isegawa achieves the same fictional impact by depicting his most likeable characters – Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka – in devastating predicaments on account of AIDS.

Isegawa's depiction of Aunt Lwandeka in *Abyssinian Chronicles* spotlights an intimate and personalized suffering that substantiates Agar's argument that "literature can and indeed must, contribute to what is understood as AIDS […] reading fiction about and of [AIDS,] then, allows for a critical re-reading of some of the seemingly dominant and stereotyped issues inherent in AIDS discourse" (Agar 1). Following Agar, our understanding of the corporeal anguish of an AIDS-infected person is captured by Mugezi's observation that "the woman I had once desired, spied on through a keyhole and felt protective about had gone, leaving behind a skeleton barely covered by rubbery skin" (Isegawa 469). If we take Agar's argument to imply that fiction does not only provide us with information about AIDS, but also dispenses with the various stereotypes about the disease then Mugezi's

vivid explanation of how Aunt Lwandeka wastes away sufficiently does what Agar is advocating: it unravels the complex contours of AIDS. Isegawa's vocabulary in describing the physical deterioration of Aunt Lwandeka underlines the potency of the disease. Expressions like 'skeleton' and 'rubbery skin' contrast with Aunt Lwandeka's former beauty and desirability in a way that amplifies the particularity of the physical impact of AIDS on the human body. A case in point is the narrator's observation:

> The fevers returned in full force. They made her shiver and her teeth chatter. Her sweat soaked through the sheets to the bottom of the mattress. Her skin was like a sieve, letting go of the fluids she took in. She shrunk more visibly now. Diarrhoea came, burned in her rectum and never let go. By this time her urine had become a mixture of red and yellow. (Isegawa 438-9)

The narrator further observes that "a monstrous pimple had attacked her right cheek, which had swollen to the size of a fist, she looked deformed, tortured, scared. I was chilled to the bone" (Isegawa 438). Still on the same page, the narrator notes that "the next attack was around the waist: people called it the "belt of death" (Isegawa 438). Unimaginable suffering that turns the body of an AIDS sufferer into an unrecognizable mass of flesh is the image that seeps through the three passages above. Using pilling as a technique, Isegawa progressively unravels a picture of unimaginable suffering that Aunt Lwandeka endures as she battles AIDS. Pilling is complemented with vivid imagery and monstrously gothic vocabulary. The verbs such as 'deformed,' 'tortured,' 'soaked,' 'burned' and 'shrunk' work with adjectives such as 'monstrous pimple,' 'size of a fist' and 'belt of death' to amplify the suffering and pain of AIDS. The above passages act as penultimate depictions of Aunt Lwandeka's physical suffering. The narrator's prior descriptions of the fevers that torture her, or the 'monstrous pimples' and 'belt of death' that attack her and 'form blisters' and 'sores across her body' (Isegawa 438-9) serve not only to accentuate her pain, but also act as physical markers and/or badges that make her pain and suffering legible.

Isegawa's use of diction and stylization to draw a vivid picture of AIDS-related pain reminds us of Lizzy Attree's observation that literary texts close the distance between readers and the fictional depiction of AIDS sufferers by "unveiling the hitherto silent body at length, creating space to think and write about the reality of the physical and mental suffering inflicted by HIV/AIDS, the truth of HIV and AIDS can be exposed" (Attree 199). Attree's argument echoes Martha Nussbaum's postulation that "we see the world through the eyes of a particular person who encounters special and terrible disadvantage" (Nussbaum 93). Both Attree and Nussbaum argue that literary depictions give readers access to the terrible realities and/or

conditions of people who are unlike them. Although the two scholars are writing from different contexts — Nussbaum from a patriarchal/racialized North America and Attree from a South African HIV/AIDS context — their reasoning converges in their belief that literary texts allow us insights into the life histories of vulnerable subjectivities. I argue that their postulation is applicable to Isegawa's chronicling of Aunt Lwandeka's corporeal deterioration and disfiguration as portrayed in *Abyssinian Chronicles*.

The world of AIDS that we get a glimpse of through the eyes of the narrator in Isegawa's novel succeeds in depicting the AIDS sufferer as a living dead. Nonetheless, Isegawa manages to infuse agency in the actions of his protagonist. In spite of, or perhaps because of, her corporeal deformation variously scripted in the novel, Aunt Lwandeka resists the label of a victim as underscored in the passage: "the next time I went to see her, she refused to open the door. She had already sent the children to their fathers. She was determined to go through her last days on her own" (Isegawa 440). I read the above passage as underscoring Aunt Lwandeka's agency. Her refusal to open her door to Mugezi and sending her children to their father offers two possible interpretations: while her action can be interpreted as a loss of hope and resignation to fate, I argue that her desire to live her last days on her terms is a reclamation of her agency.[7]

Conclusion

It is plausible to argue that AIDS has been a recurrent trope in Ugandan public life for the last three decades. Consequently, various intellectuals – with an artistic or medico-scientific inclination – have variously used different tools to demystify this pandemic. Therefore, it is unsurprising that AIDS has been a recurrent trope in Ugandan literature for the last 30 years. Among these writers is Moses Isegawa who uses focalization, characterization and setting in his *Abyssinian Chronicles* to explore the impact of AIDS on individuals and societies. In this article, I have also argued that Isegawa uses the two most likeable characters in the novel – Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka – to place a personalized vision of the disease in the public sphere. Although in the first part of 'Triangular Revelation' (the section which documents AIDS) Isegawa is weighed down with anxiety to define and contextualize AIDS in Uganda, he brilliantly complicates this anxiety by deploying an observant, articulate and eloquent narrator who uses the spatial and temporal nodes of Rakai (early days) and Kampala (later days) and an evocative register to center the psychological and corporeal anguish of Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka. This helps him disclose for the readers the "intricacies, idiosyncrasies, depth and detail of the disease" (Attree 199). I agree with Attree that the power of the AIDS narrative lies in its deciphering of the minute aspects of the

victims. Isegawa's text succeeds in documenting the suffering of his characters because of the power of its graphic and corporeal/psychic depiction of AIDS. These characteristics manifest evocatively in the tales of Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka, as explored above.

Isegawa's writing of AIDS in *Abyssinian Chronicles* does not only provide information about AIDS. It discloses how the disease is variously manifested on the bodies and in the psyche of its victims. This is perhaps why Isegawa's text uses the stories of Uncle Kawayida and Aunt Lwandeka to highlight the individuality and agency of AIDS victims. Thus, the novel foregrounds the individual experiences of AIDS rather than using various characters' experiences as metaphors for the disease or their troubled nation. For example, while Uncle Kawayida asserts his agency by recommending chicken soup as a cure, Aunt Lwandeka's agency is underlined by her decision to suffer and die on her own terms. Thus, it can be argued that Isegawa uses the suffering and agency of his characters to enact a platform of 'readerships' and 'audiences' (Attree 2004) that can attempt to make legible the mental anguish and corporeal deterioration associated with AIDS. This makes *Abyssinian Chronicles* an important text that shows how fiction can be used to demystify AIDS.

Notes

1. The singularly linear narrative at the core of the cautionary motif – it could be argued that Ugandan writers are drawing on the country's folktales and fables that employ the ogre as a quintessential trope of the cautionary tale – uses fiction to explain how AIDS is acquired, its statistical impact on individuals and society as well as actions to combat the pandemic that recalls what Epprecht calls "received wisdom and rational logic [that fills] in the many critical gaps in the knowledge about the disease in its African manifestation" (1)

2. However, women bear the brunt of the scourge because of the catastrophic intersection of AIDS with patriarchal and gender oppression.

3. It is important to note that Isegawa, by setting Uncle Kawayida's trials and tribulations with AIDS in Rakai during the early days of the disease, is deliberately mimicking the real history of the disease. This is because it is on record that the first cases of AIDS were reported in Rakai and in fact, it is plausible to argue that Rakai is perhaps one part of Uganda that was most affected by AIDS.

4. Here, it can be plausibly argued that Uncle Kawayida stands synecdochally for the Ugandan society that exhibited profound resilience and courage in the face of AIDS. It is this courage and resilience to confront a dangerous and mysterious disease that perhaps

explains the tremendous success the country enjoyed in pushing back against AIDS.

5. Here, we recall the case of an elderly woman in the former Masaka District called Nanyongo. In late 1989, she claimed that God had given her powers to cure AIDS by administering 'holy soil' in her garden to the patients. Similarly, I have argued elsewhere that the rampant underage prostitution and defilement in the age of AIDS arises from the irrational myth that having sex (raping) a virgin girl cures AIDS. As despicable as the above examples seem, they are comparable to Uncle Kawayida's claim that the soup from his chicken could heal AIDS.

6. NRM stands for the National Resistance Movement, which is the ruling political party in Uganda. The party's leader and President of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has been credited with the success that the country achieved in the fight against AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s because of his policies of openness about the pandemic.

7. While such an interpretation is valid and plausible, it is important to note that she is motivated to take such a drastic action on account of the devastating impact of the disease on her body. She is in a way protecting her loved ones from the horror that the disease has ravaged on her body.

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