

No, Not Alien

Kasimma

Nwanne dị na mba is one of the wise sayings with which I armed myself when I first stepped foot on American soil. Back home, I watched movies, read tons of books, listened to the news, speeches, interviews, and the recurring theme is that the United States is a racist country. Yet, on arrival, I promised myself two things: One, steer clear of the police because your skin places you at a disadvantage. Two, you will never label a single human being as a racist unless that person gives you a reason to do so, *maka n'anyị ncha bụ ụmụnne*. I can gratefully say that I survived my first year in the United States because of the kindness of my classmates who offered me warm clothes, food, love, family.

That is why I was thrown off balance when they expressed discomfort at my usage of too many Igbo words in my stories. Worse still, they said, I do not translate these words. Our professor countered, stating that Google was only a click away, but they complained that they had no time to keep googling every Igbo word they encountered.

Onye na nke ya would have been a perfect response because I am certain that the problem is their deep unfamiliarity with non-American stories and writers, and perhaps their impatience or unwillingness to learn. I always have a notepad and pen, a dictionary, and Google handy when I read. I might need to find out the meaning of an English word, translate languages, or write down sentences that hit me. This world seems to be so much in a hurry. People, students included, are more invested in reading Tweets and social media posts than books. This has seen the rise in flash fiction, micro fiction, and now I hear there is such a thing as nano fiction. People cannot stand heavy books. And this accounts for the increase in series, volumes, sequels because publishers must sprinkle one story into different books so that people will read them.

Onye na nke ya stopped clarifying things when, in that same class, I learned that it is okay to leave American slang, terms, or places unexplained in a story. *Why?* I asked. *Well, because Everybody knows what it means!* So, I sat there befuddled, wondering where, in the name of the Gods of my ancestors, had I been exempted: in Every or in Body?

It appears that “We the people of the United States” assume there are only two places in the world: the United States and Others. Or, to sound more official, United States Citizens and Aliens.

E. C. Osondu dazzles us with his short story collection, *Alien Stories*, published in 2021 by BOA Editions. In the fourth story, “Visitors,” Osondu tells the story of visitors to a small American village. We get the story from a local man’s point of view. His wife, “a good woman but the problem is that she is too good for her own good, sometimes” (42), invites the new aliens in the village to the house and the man cannot not understand why. He reflects that once, his wife invited Africans to their house for lunch. The man picked umbrage because he knew nothing about Africans. He did not know what to discuss with them, how to behave around them. All he knew about Africans was the 1980 *The Gods Must Be Crazy* movie. Though Osondu does not mention the name of the movie, from the summary, I knew. It was one of my best movies when I was a child, ignorant, innocent. So, when these “Alien African” visitors arrived, this good woman’s husband discussed parenthood with them, hearing a story about their son’s injury while playing football. The local man eventually concludes that “the father’s anguish, clearly evident as he told the story, made me realize that Africans were people like me, too” (46).

Yet, this same protagonist, despite his conclusion, feels apprehensive at the visit of another alien family. They still visit, those aliens. They narrate the story of how their son almost died because the American doctors alienated them, did not even run any tests, yet conclude that their baby has COVID-19 (not mentioned in the story, but easily deducible from the author’s description). It takes the intervention of another doctor who, like they, is a foreigner, to examine the child and diagnose him with an ear infection. Later that afternoon, the child is well enough to sit up after taking simple antibiotics. Our American protagonist then feels so sorry for the tired-looking alien baby that he carries and rocks him.

What changed for this protagonist, one might ask? Stories. This protagonist realised that these “aliens” are living things too with happiness and sadness too, fear and courage too, love and anxiety too, just as he. These “aliens” are not alienated from every human emotion on account of their being “aliens.”

Alien, according to some of the definitions of the updated March 2023 Oxford English Dictionary, is *Born in, or owing allegiance to, a foreign country; esp. designating a foreigner*

who is not a naturalized citizen of the country where he or she is living or Belonging to another person, place, or family; not of one's own; from elsewhere, foreign (OED Online).

When I google pictures of aliens, what pops out are images of green organisms with egg-shaped heads, big oval eyes, drippy slimy bodies, not humans. Some resembles octopuses. So, I wonder, who got the name “aliens” first? The immigrants, transmigrants inclusive, or the creatures from other planets? Why does it matter? Because someone sitting behind some desk, at some past year, made the decision to see immigrants as slimy green forms or to see slimy green forms as immigrants. There is a difference.

I once enjoyed the privilege of discussing with E. C. Osondu in an interview published in *Identity Theory*, 2021, where we discussed *Alien Stories*, his book, and *All Shades of Iberibe*, mine. I asked him why he decided to write about aliens (as per foreigners) and aliens (as per aliens). His response: “I am interested in both because in America there is often not much of a difference. A Nigerian immigrant is a Non Resident Alien while a Martian could as well have the same status. In fact, E.T. the Extraterrestrial may find even more welcoming arms here. To be called an Alien is to be alienated and othered. What’s not to like in being an outsider looking in?”

Suppose we want to keep the name aliens for these slimy green forms, what then stops us from deleting it from our vocabulary as a name for immigrants? Immigrants pay taxes. They pay even more school fees than the locals. They contribute, in any way you look at it, to the economy of their host country. Why then are they not simply accorded the courtesy of being called humans?

“How to Raise an Alien Baby” another story in the same collection, *Alien Stories*, gives rules on how an earthling mother should raise an alien baby, perhaps an insight into how the United States might feel about their immigrants. Rules like:

No television antennas... Our alien guests will grab and twist every antenna-finger to tell their people sensitive things about us, if we let them. If they are living with you, they will certainly know all sorts of things about you... Yes, of course, they’ll know all that stuff, you probably don’t want an entire planet knowing these things... Let’s say we plan to attack their planet tomorrow, to seize it and make it our own, to force them to come harvest our potatoes, our almonds and tomatoes, our oranges and grapes, and so on and so forth. As you well know, in warfare, surprise attack is the mother of victory... What do you think they’d do if they get this

actionable piece of information? Of course, they would strike our planet. And you bet they wouldn't show mercy... You don't want to go about hurting the feelings of our little alien baby... And none of your old DVDs and space-themed movies from yesteryear... Those boxed-up video cassettes in the basement:... *Planet of the Apes, Logan's Run*. Get rid of them, every single one... The truth is that no one knows whether aliens have souls... The alien will never be human... It is impossible to raise a child without having to discipline them... Some parents have... actually started to wish their ward *would* break the rules. Some even look for ways to make them break the rules so they can feel they are actually fulfilling their parental duty... Do not be surprised if they beg you to tell them what to do. Free will makes us human and it is the absence of free will that makes an alien an alien. (34-40)

This story speaks of aliens in all shapes in which they come: immigrants and aliens. It speaks more of immigrants, beginning from slavery, more than it speaks of aliens, because, for all we know, nobody has ever kept an actual alien baby. Were these the rules the slave owners shuffled amongst themselves? Of course, it cannot be farfetched from the truth. *Subdue the slaves because they are not humans. Hide the offensive movies from the immigrants, just to pat their ego*. But why would the earthling mother, in that story, even have those movies in the first place? Oh, the author answers it, because “the alien will never be human” (38).

In Igbo, the name for sibling, cousin, nephew, niece, is *nwannem* which means *my mother's child*. Igbos recognize that *anyi ncha bu umunne*, and they are right because, indeed, we are all children of Humanity. Therefore, Igbos treat every being, human or not, as *nwanne*. One of my favourite Igbo maxims is *ala bu otu, the earth is only one*. The land in Asia is the same one in the Sahara and the same in Canada. The sky is the same. The oceans are the same. Why then are we nourished by the same Mother Earth, yet we insist that we are not all her children? That some are more of her children than others?

When I watched *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, I laughed so hard at the black man. But I was just a child then. Now, I cannot laugh at that man because that movie mocks black people as brainless beings who do not even know what a common Coke bottle is! This is what the protagonist in “Visitors” and many real-life people-of-no-colour, who watched that movie, find funny. It is what I no longer find funny. Nobody has a right to judge people whose stories they do or do not know. And by stories, I do not mean fiction, though it's a start, but reading

memoirs, non-fiction, and true stories of these people. Visit those places if you must. But do not sit at home, making conclusions about others.

Stories open our minds to the humanity in us all. But even after reading, judge every human you meet, if you must judge, more by their intention than their action. Treat them the way you'll treat your nwanne, the way you'll want your nwanne to be treated when they become "aliens" in a foreign land.

I thought I had read all the writers there are in the United States until I arrived in the United States. Names of books and writers I have never heard roll off the tongues of my classmates. What I do is I write out those names, go online, search for a short story they wrote, and read. If I love their voice, I'll advance to reading their book. Yet, even now, I cannot judge any part of the United States of America based on what I read or watch about them. And even if I read non-fiction about them, written by them, I still will not judge every American based on one person's experience because humans are expansively diverse.

Therefore, when my classmates criticised my story for bearing my identity, I did not get angry. I considered their intention (they wanted to understand my stories better), rather than their action (they judged my identity). This is because I mingle with them as *umunne*, children of *Ọma*, just as I, and that allows me a clear eye to see their hearts. It gave them a chance to draw near to me and be kind to me. They have become the American family I so need. Had I concluded, before even meeting them, that they would be racist because the books say so, I might have frozen to death in winter.

I went into an MFA program as a published author with short stories and poems sprinkled in more literary journals than I care to count. My stories landed me fully paid residencies abroad. I'd been taught by internationally acclaimed authors before I even considered an MFA program. I have never written a story without Igbo words. That's why I gathered that suggestion, *Reduce the Igbo words in your story*, beside my chair. It did not even make it out of the corner of my seat to say nothing of following me home.

Oh, and just as an aside, I sold the said piece of fiction a few days after the workshop. I sold it the way it was, with all the Igbo words intact. It's a very short story, and I sold it for an enormous, rewarding sum.

The ratio of stories and books from BIPOC is way lesser than those of people-of-no-colour. I believe that the concept of alien, that notion that alienates a group of people, that others

them, is responsible for this. The concept, alien, is responsible for the American I-don't-care-where-you-are-from attitude. Because, I mean, someone who is not done exploring planet Earth will have very little need (if any) to visit Mars and spend Thanksgiving with some actual aliens.

Of all the American undergrads I've taught, only one hand has gone up when I say, "I am Nigerian. How many of you know where Nigeria is?" That hand belonged to a Cameroonian.

Stories matter. Stories make us see, actually SEE, the other person. We should start, at the very least, when telling these stories, to avoid calling immigrants "aliens." No, immigrants are not aliens. They are simply immigrants.

Unu anugo?

Kasimma is from Igboland (obodo ndi dike). She's the author of *All Shades of Iberibe* (Croatian: *Portret Za Dar-Mar*), the 2022 Nikky Finney Fellow, and the Humanities Graduate Fellow at the University of Utah. Her writings appear in *Solarpunk*, *LitHub*, *Meet Cute*, and many other journals and anthologies. She's been awarded writers' residencies across Africa, Asia, and Europe, including the prestigious Wole Soyinka Foundation Writers' Residency. Kasimma is an alumna of Chimamanda Adichie's creative writing workshop and a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Kentucky. Read more: <https://kasimma.com/read-online/>

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