RAY: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, E-ISSN: 2456-3064
Volume X, No. 1 / April, 2025, pp. 80-89.

Stitching Together Nationalism: The Intersection of Fashion and Culture in *Aya: Life in Yop City*

Shubhaiyu Chakraborty
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Sudhiranjan Lahiri Mahavidyalaya,
Majdia, West Bengal, India.
shubhaiyu007@gmail.com

Structured Abstract:

Purpose: This analysis examines Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie's graphic novel Aya: Life in Yop City (2012), set in late 1970s–1980s post-colonial Ivory Coast, to explore how clothing and hairstyles reflect national identity, cultural hybridity, and generational tensions.

Methodology: The study centres on fashion as a tool for negotiating post-colonial identity, contrasting traditional African attire with Western-influenced styles. It highlights how dress and bodily aesthetics symbolize resistance, aspiration, and belonging in a globalizing society. Through visual and narrative analysis of the graphic novel's medium, the work interrogates generational divides: older characters' adherence to indigenous styles versus younger characters' embrace of modernity and global pop culture. The body and dress are framed as contested sites of cultural memory, colonial legacy, and self-expression.

Findings: Fashion serves as a dynamic signifier of social change, mapping tensions between tradition and modernity. Youth adoption of "exotic" Western styles reflects aspirations for autonomy and global belonging, while elders critique these choices as cultural erosion. The visual medium amplifies clothing's role in constructing identity, emphasizing its power to negotiate individual and collective narratives.

Value: The novel underscores fashion as a critical lens for understanding post-colonial identity formation, revealing how everyday aesthetics mediate power, resistance, and globalization in Ivory Coast's urban landscape.

Keywords Nationalism, Fashion, Postcolonialism, Popular Culture

Nationalism, as a social and political ideology, often revolves around the formation of identity, unity, and pride within a specific nation or cultural group. One of the most potent and visible ways that nationalism is expressed is through dress—an important tool in the performance and assertion of national identity. Clothing, as both a personal and collective symbol, carries powerful messages about belonging, cultural heritage, political affiliation, and social status. From traditional attire to modern national uniforms, dress functions as a canvas on which national narratives are painted, sometimes consciously, and other times unconsciously. Discussions on dress as part of popular culture or its evolving representation in the literature of 'colonized' nations have largely been overlooked by literary and cultural critics. This is likely because dress styles belong to the realm of visual discourse, while most literature and cultural texts from these nations are designed for reading, emphasizing imagination over visual representation. Over time, writers have focused primarily on describing body parts, often neglecting other important aspects, such as clothing and hairstyles, that complement them. African literature and cultural texts face the same gap. *Aya: Life in Yop City* (2012) stands out as an exception. Presented as a graphic novel, a term often used to describe comics, it is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context from which it originates. As a product of popular culture, graphic novels uniquely combine both verbal and visual elements, creating a dynamic and multifaceted genre. The visual medium in graphic novels serves as a rich tapestry of cultural symbols. Through this form, representation becomes a powerful tool for depicting people and situations in an engaging and relatable way. *Aya: Life in Yop City* (2012) opens up the possibility of discussing fashion and hair styling—both of which are integral to the identity of the people of Côte d'Ivoire, a country located on the southern coast of West Africa.

Aya: Life in Yop City (2012), written by Marguerite Abouet and illustrated by Clément Oubrerie, recounts the author's early life in Yopougon, a working-class neighborhood in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Set during the late 1970s and early 1980s under the leadership of the charismatic president Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the graphic novel follows the lives of Aya and other residents of Yopougon. Through the perspective of Aya, the story offers a candid portrayal of Yopougonian society, presenting a view of Africa that contrasts sharply with the typical depictions of war and famine. In the graphic novel, Yopougon is

reimagined as "Yop City," a playful reference to New York City, which reflects the community's social spaces, postmodern lifestyles, and fascination with popular culture. The narrative is filled with events that highlight the residents' attempts to assimilate foreign cultures, as depicted in newspapers and on television. Hairstyles and fashion in the story become key tools for expressing personal desires, sensuality, and a fragmented sense of identity, stemming from the characters' search for self-definition. The depiction of clothing and hairstyles in *Aya: Life in Yop City* (2012) will be analyzed as cultural signifiers within the visual discourse.

Aya: Life in Yop City begins in 1978 with a large panel depicting a television set broadcasting a Solibra beer advertisement, featuring Dago, a popular local comedian. After drinking Solibra, Dago humorously claims to have the power to "blow by buses on his bicycle" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 13). In the following panel, a group of working-class people—"family and friends together" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 14)—are shown in Aya's living room, watching the same advertisement, which airs "every night at 7 p.m." (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 14). Both panels emphasize the fact that, by the late 1970s, Ivorian society was already deeply influenced by the intrusion of popular culture.

In their influential work *Popular Culture – A User's Guide* (2017), Imre Szeman and Susie O'Brien offer a comprehensive definition of popular culture. They describe it as entertainment produced by commercial media (such as television, film, and the music industry) that has the economic and technological capacity to reach large, diverse, and geographically spread audiences. Popularity, they argue, is measured through consumption patterns, referring to the things people buy, watch, listen to, and engage with. In this sense, popular culture represents what "the people" create or do for themselves (Szeman & O'Brien, 2017, p. 16).

In *Aya: Life in Yop City*, various elements—such as the television in Aya's living room, the numerous maquis in Yopougon like Va Chauffer (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 20-23), Secouez-Vous (Abouet & Oubrerie,2012,pp.35-36), and Chez Maxim's (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp.154-155), restaurants like Allocodro (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 55-57) and Les Presic (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 89-91), expensive hotels like The Hotel Ivorie (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 146-149), budget hotels like the Thousand Star Hotel (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 40-41), the Miss Yopougon 80 beauty pageant (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 258-267), and the songs played at these maquis, at Ignace's car stereo, at Moussa-Ajoua's wedding, and at the beauty contest—all allude to the infiltration of Eurocentric popular culture. It is also noteworthy that Ivory Coast was a French colony

before gaining independence in 1960. Under the leadership of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the country experienced rapid economic growth, known as the Ivorian Miracle, leading to unprecedented wealth. Post-independence, Houphouët-Boigny maintained strong ties with France, which provided economic and other assistance through French expatriates. These connections facilitated the introduction of European pop culture to Ivory Coast. The period of socio-economic boom, during which the graphic novel is set, saw the flourishing of both foreign investments and cultural distinctions, particularly in Abidjan. The elements of popular culture mentioned, including social rituals, serve as symbols for the construction of individual and collective identity among the residents of Yop City.

In Yopougon, the middle class, working class, and peasants coexist harmoniously. The timeline in the graphic novel suggests a promising future, even for ordinary people. Both the young and the old in Yopougon embrace all forms of exoticism, with the only divergence of opinion arising in the preference of the older generation for Koutoukou over Solibra: "I like my beer, beer, beer but I'd rather have wine, wine ... Koutoukou is strong, strong strong" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 24).

Georg Simmel, in his essay "Fashion" (1957), provides valuable insight into the role of fashion. He asserts that "fashion is a form of imitation and so of social equalization . . . It unites those of a social class and segregates them from others . . . the elite initiates a fashion, and, when the mass imitates it in an effort to obliterate the external distinctions, abandons it for a newer mode—a process that quickens with the increase of wealth" (Simmel, 1957, p. 541). Fashion plays a crucial role in shaping communal identity, but with the influx of popular culture, traditional fashion gradually gave way to more exotic styles. Both the young and the old, the rich and the poor, all embraced "imported" fashion. Daniel Miller on the other hand, mentions in his *Blue Jeans*, "Fashion isn't about being more restricted; rather, it reflects the broader cultural trends that are tied to specific decades and generations, influenced by commerce."(Miller, 1987, p. 20) To conform Miller, it can be perceived that the dominance of traditional gender roles prompts us to consider the class dimension of clothing. When examining women across different social classes, clothing provides valuable insight into social structure. In patriarchal societies, women's clothing often symbolizes men's wealth, as women are viewed as their property. In modern societies, where the primary unit is the household, a woman's clothing reflects the wealth of the household she belongs to. While middle-class homemakers attempt to emulate the fashion of the upper class on a smaller budget, working-class homemakers have far fewer resources available for their appearance.

Social events such as weddings, beauty pageants, and funerals provided opportunities for individuals to showcase their latest clothing and hairstyles. The fashion scene in Yopougon was largely shaped by two key figures: Sikidi, the city's well-known tailor and fashion designer, and Inno, the stylist who owned the most popular salon. Sikidi is first introduced on page 100 of the graphic novel, where he is seen surrounded by customers, mostly young girls who demand styles inspired by imported magazines. One of them says, "My Catherine Deneuve dress needs to be shorter" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 100). Sikidi responds, "What do you want? A dress or a shirt?" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 100). The adolescents are captivated by television commercials and fashion magazines, where local and international celebrities promote various commercial brands. They idolize these figures and aspire to look like or wear what these celebrities endorse. This phenomenon of hero worship is common in developing nations. For instance, in India during the 1970s, many young men sought to imitate the fashion and hairstyles of the popular actor Amitabh Bachchan, while Indian girls aspired to be like the actress Hema Malini. Similarly, Catherine Deneuve, the iconic French actress, became a favourite among Ivorian girls, as her films and commercials were widely broadcast. Sikidi, overwhelmed by the constant demands, laments, "You're wearing me out with these complicated magazine dresses" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 100). These girls flock to Sikidi's shop, eager to transform into divas at social events, with Sikidi assuming the role of a fairy godmother.

Television commercials, fashion magazines, and newspapers—both local and global—serve as vehicles for socio-cultural constructs and ideologies that are embedded within them. Through the medium of this graphic novel, Abouet highlights her agenda: the model of Eurocentric hegemony, where the natives were previously silenced by colonial powers, is no longer operative. Here, the subalterns "speak" and actively pursue perfection through their fashion choices. This obsession with "remaking" their "imperfect" bodies challenges the Eurocentric ideal that the body is perfect as created by God, while also revealing the psychic inferiority that persists among native subalterns. They seek a makeover to align themselves with the idealized Western white beauty, which in turn becomes a way to assert and fulfill their mundane existence and identity, paving the way for the formation of fragmented identities.

Clothing complements personality, and all the characters in *Aya: Life in Yop City* (2012) exhibit distinct dressing styles. A closer examination of the dressing culture in Yop City reveals a sharp divide between the older and younger generations, as well as between the rich and the poor. Figure 1 highlights the indigenous attire worn by older women such as

Fanta (Aya's mother), Alphonsine (Bintou's mother), and Aisstou (Fortune's wife), among others.

National dress serves as a powerful form of visual expression, signaling not only cultural pride but also resistance to outside influences. In many post-colonial societies, traditional attire becomes a symbol of reclaiming identity and rejecting colonial legacies. For example, in India, the sari became an emblem of national identity during the British colonial period, signaling a reclaiming of cultural heritage. In *Aya: Life in Yop City*, women, as shown in Figure 1, reflect the traditional clothing styles of middle-class women, adhering to indigenous identities. These women wear pagnes or blouses paired with long pieces of cloth wrapped around their bodies as skirts, in contrast to the more exotic "postmodern" fashion flaunted by the younger generation, such as Aya, Bintou, and Adjoua (Abouet&Oubrerie, 2012).

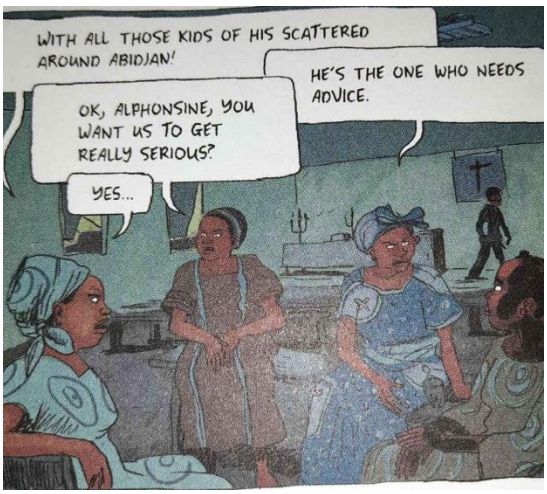

Figure 1. **Copyright© Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie**
(Source: Abouet, M., &Oubrerie, C. (2012). *Aya: Life in Yop City*. Drawn & Quarterly., P. 320)

In an era of globalization, the distinction between national identities and global fashion trends is increasingly becoming less defined. Nationalism through clothing is not solely about preserving tradition; it also entails incorporating global influences to create a modern, hybrid national identity. For example, upper-class women, like Mrs. Sissoko, Moussa's mother, choose to wear luxurious fabrics instead of the brightly printed pagnes and matching headscarves commonly worn by women in the lower and middle classes. Mrs. Sissoko's outfits are a symbol of high culture, setting her apart from other women of her age in the neighborhood. Her style is shaped by newspapers and magazines—key sources of popular

culture. She carries this fashionable image with her wherever she goes, even to a burial site. Her striking black gown and hat, worn at a relative's funeral in a distant village, became a topic of conversation in the village (Abouet&Oubrerie, 2012).

The younger generation of Yop City favours clothing that combines the exotic and tropical, the global and local, as well as the modern and traditional. While their clothes are not imported, the fabrics they use are either locally sourced or imported, often designed or patterned according to the wearer's personal style or inspired by popular foreign figures. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the types of clothing worn by this younger generation (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012).

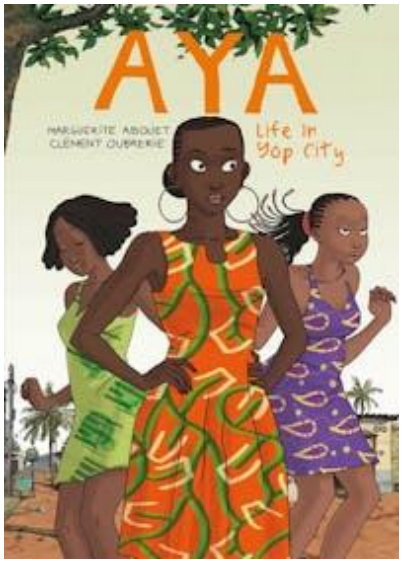

Figure 2. **Copyright© Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie**

(Source: Abouet, M., &Oubrerie, C. (2012). *Aya: Life in Yop City*. Drawn & Quarterly., Cover Page)

Aya is portrayed with a slim physique, often choosing slim-fit half-sleeve blouses and skirts. She also opts for sleeveless outfits when the occasion or ceremony requires it (Abouet&Oubrerie, 2012). Bintou's figure-hugging skirt-and-blouse combination accentuates her body's curves, which she uses to attract the attention of men. The street boys of Yop City admire her, commenting, "Mm! Yop City girls sure are pretty, Deh" (Abouet&Oubrerie, 2012, p. 168). The Miss Yopougon 80 beauty pageant, depicted in Figure 3 , showcases the latest fashion trends in Yop City (Abouet&Oubrerie, 2012).

Figure 3. **Copyright© Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie**

(Source: Abouet, M., &Oubrerie, C. (2012). *Aya: Life in Yop City*. Drawn & Quarterly., P. 262)

The sleeveless, tight-fitting outfits worn by Wassia, Félicité, Pauline, and other participants in the "Miss Yopougon 80" contest reflect the postmodern dress culture, standing in stark contrast to the traditional attire of the older generation, as shown in Figure 1 (Abouet&Oubrerie, 2012). The fashion trends in Yop City emphasize the female body, commodifying it and enhancing its marketability, thus transforming individuals and their bodies "into objects of economic desire" (Sharp, 1993, p. 293).

Men in Yop City are also keen on power dressing. Mr. Sissoko enjoys wearing a kimono made from expensive fabric at home, signaling aristocracy. Ignace, Graveis, and Pastor Basil are often seen in suits and ties during formal occasions, which signifies their status in the affluent middle class. Gregoire, who initially earned some fortune in Paris before squandering it at the Hotel Ivorie, dresses formally as a symbol of elegance and high culture. Meanwhile, Moussa, Hervé, and other younger individuals prefer jeans and T-shirts. Inno, the hairdresser, cross-dresses by wearing a female wig to conceal his sexual orientation as a homosexual when meeting Albert every night at the Thousand Star Hotel (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, pp. 164, 203, 268, 299, 322).

Since the beginning of recorded history, hairstyling has been a fundamental human practice to highlight beauty and power. Hair, being a vital aspect of one's appearance, has made grooming, styling, and adornment widespread across societies. With the influx of popular culture, the younger generation is drawn to modern, exotic hairstyles. In Yop City,

hairstyling is much more than a cosmetic practice—it is a deeply significant cultural, social, and political statement. It reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, individual identity, and social status. Whether through the preservation of cultural heritage, the pursuit of personal beauty, or the assertion of power and resistance, hairstyles in Yopougon serve as a vital expression of both personal and collective identity. As urbanization and globalization continue to shape the city's landscape, hairstyling will remain a powerful tool for reflecting the evolving cultural landscape of Yopougon and its people.In *Aya: Life in Yop City* (2012), several panels depict Inno's beauty salon, a unisex establishment where both men and women wait for their turn. Inno's skill in transforming simple hair into exotic styles, often inspired by renowned foreign figures like musicians and actors, has made him a beloved figure in Yop City (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, Figure 4).

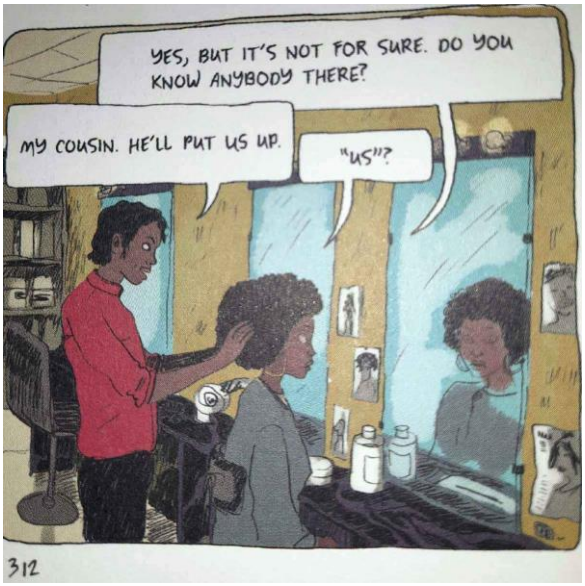

Figure 4. **Copyright© Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie**

(Source: Abouet, M., &Oubrerie, C. (2012). *Aya: Life in Yop City*. Drawn & Quarterly., P. 313)

Félicité expresses the desires of the youth of Yop City when she asks Aya, "Are you sure I'll look like the girl in the movie?" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p.78). Similarly, Mrs. Sissoko invites her stylist to her home, opens a magazine, and says, "Aminata, I want my hair exactly like this!" (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012, p. 81).

In *Aya: Life in Yop City* (2012), both postcolonial and postmodern theories highlight how dress and hairstyling function as cultural signifiers. The media plays a significant role in producing and distributing meanings within Yopougon's postcolonial society, as European magazines, newspapers, and television perpetuate the cultural superiority of Whites over Blacks. Yopougon, as a postcolonial space, becomes susceptible to the Eurocentric

construction of knowledge that fosters social binaries, prompting a desire to conform to the 'superior' culture by eliminating the "imperfections" of the postcolonial body. The inhabitants of Yopougon strive to build a vision of perfection. African beauty is now constructed as personal, subjective, and fluid, with the body viewed as a decorative surface to be displayed during ceremonies. The emergence of a new stylistic consciousness from Yopougon, as a marginalized space, does not aim to dominate Abidjan's cultural standards as the center; instead, it highlights the omnipresence of fashion and the potential for marginalized spaces to shift paradigms and assert their cultural freedom (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2012). As a visual language of nationalism, clothing provides a unique lens through which to explore the complex intersections of identity, culture, power, and resistance. Whether in the form of resistance to colonialism, the celebration of heritage, or the negotiation of modernity, dress remains a powerful tool in the ongoing narrative of national identity.

References:

Abouet, M., &Oubrerie, C. (2012). *Aya: Life in Yop City*. Drawn & Quarterly.

Miller, D., & Woodward, S. (2012). *Blue jeans: The art of the ordinary*. University of California Press.

Sharp, L. A. (2000). The commodification of the body and its parts. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 29*, 287-328. https://lchc.ucsd.edu/cogn_150/Readings/sharp.pdf

Simmel, G. (1957). Fashion. *The American Journal of Sociology*, *62*(6), 541-558. https://sites.middlebury.edu/individualandthesociety/files/2010/09/Simmel.fashion.pdf

Szeman, I., & O'Brien, S. (2017). *Popular culture – A user's guide*. Wiley Blackwell.