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Spatial Violence and the Erasure of Lived Space in Ovo Adagha's "Homeless"

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Abstract
This paper examines spatial violence in Ovo Adagha's "Homeless" through the theoretical framework of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space. It argues that the demolition scene represents not merely the destruction of physical shelter but the erasure of lived space—space embedded with memory, identity, and social meaning. Drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad of spatial practice, conceived space, and lived space, the study demonstrates how everyday poverty is structured through spatial inequality and how state-driven urban planning violently overrides experiential dwelling. The bulldozers symbolize the intrusion of abstract, administrative power into intimate domestic life, transforming home into rubble and belonging into displacement. By situating personal trauma within broader processes of urban restructuring and accumulation by dispossession, the paper reads "Homeless" as a critique of spatial domination. Ultimately, the study highlights how demolition operates as a political intervention, revealing the existential consequences of erasing lived space in the name of development.

Keywords: Spatial Violence, Lived Space, Urban Demolition, Production of Space, Ovo Adagha

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Ovo Adagha's story, "Homeless," portrays poverty as an economic condition as well as a struggle over space, i.e. the dwelling place called 'home.' It reveals how external forces decide who may inhabit a place, who controls it, and how quickly it can be taken away. This paper argues that the demolition scene stages spatial violence: the abrupt conversion of a lived neighbourhood into disposable ground. The analysis is based on Henri Lefebvre's claim that "(Social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre xii), In the story, the family's home is assembled from zinc, tarpaulin, and clay, yet it functions as more than shelter; it is the material base of survival, schooling, and family continuity. Lefebvre's emphasis on lived space is useful here because "Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre" (Lefebvre 42). The shack, the kiosk, the barefoot walk home, and the mother's desperate salvaging of household items show how dwelling becomes an emotional and social anchor even under deprivation.

The bulldozers mark the arrival of a competing conceived order which is an urban logic that treats informal housing as an obstruction. As the OHCHR notes, forced eviction involves removal "without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection" ("Forced Evictions and Human Rights"). The story's sudden crash, panic, and rain-soaked aftermath dramatize that absence of protection, turning ordinary domestic space into rubble. In this sense, Homeless exemplifies what spatial scholars describe as

the idea that "space may be a form of violence in itself," often named "spatial violence" ("Violence and the Production of Space"). By focusing on demolition, this paper reads Adagha's narrative as a critique of how state power produces urban space through erasure.

Ovo Adagha is a well-known writer who makes meaningful contribution to contemporary Nigerian writing through a sustained attention to marginal lives, urban precarity, and the emotional textures of poverty. His fiction and poetry often foreground ordinary characters negotiating loss, migration, and social invisibility. In this respect, his work aligns with what critics identify as a central preoccupation of modern African literature: the exposure of structural inequality and its intimate consequences. As Ato Quayson observes, postcolonial African narratives frequently "stage the encounter between the individual and the social system in ways that reveal the pressures of history on everyday life" (2). "Homeless" exemplifies this tension by placing a child narrator within a violent urban restructuring that exceeds her control.

Thematically, Adagha is concerned with displacement, dignity, and the fragile architecture of belonging. The story's demolition scene situates personal grief within broader patterns of urban transformation in Nigeria, where informal settlements are periodically razed in the name of order or development. Abiodun Alao notes that rapid urbanization in African cities has often intensified "the vulnerability of the urban poor to forced displacement" (145). "Homeless" participates in this discourse by rendering eviction not as an abstraction but as a lived catastrophe. Written from the perspective of children, the narrative also recalls the tradition of socially conscious Nigerian storytelling that uses youthful innocence to sharpen moral critique. Thus, "Homeless" stands within a lineage of African urban fiction that documents spatial injustice while affirming the human capacity for endurance.

The theoretical framework applied in the present paper is proposed by Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), who was a French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, and his work reshaped modern spatial theory. In *The Production of Space* (1974; English trans. 1991), Lefebvre argues that space is not an empty container in which social life happens; rather, it is actively created through political, economic, and cultural processes. His central proposition: "(Social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre xii), challenges the idea that space is neutral or natural. Instead, space reflects relations of power, class, and ideology. Urban planning, state policy, and capitalist development do not merely reorganize buildings; they reorganize lived experience.

Lefebvre's theory is especially useful for analyzing narratives of eviction and demolition because it reveals how the control of land becomes a mechanism of domination. He maintains that modern capitalism produces abstract, regulated, quantified, and administered space that often overrides lived, experiential spaces. As he explains, "Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies" (Lefebvre 31). Thus, demolition can be understood not simply as physical destruction but as the imposition of a new spatial order over an existing social world.

A foundational component of Lefebvre's thought is his spatial triad:

1. Spatial Practice (Perceived Space) – This refers to everyday routines and material activities that sustain social life. It includes movement, labour, housing patterns, and daily survival. Spatial practice makes space functional and continuous.
2. Representations of Space (Conceived Space) – This is space as designed and conceptualized by planners, architects, technocrats, and the state. It is abstract, regulated, and often tied to authority. Conceived space privileges order, efficiency, and visibility.
3. Representational Space (Lived Space) – This is space as directly experienced and emotionally inhabited. It includes memory, imagination, symbolism, and attachment. Lefebvre notes that lived space "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (39).

In the context of urban demolition, conflict arises when conceived space, i.e., state plans, zoning policies, and redevelopment agendas, overpowers lived space, the realm of memory and belonging. Scholars have expanded this insight to show how displacement operates as structural violence. As David Harvey argues, contemporary urban development frequently involves "accumulation by dispossession" (159), whereby vulnerable communities are removed to enable economic restructuring. Lefebvre's framework helps identify this process as spatial production rather than accidental misfortune. The following are the chief tenets of his theory that is relevant to the present analysis: 1. Space is socially produced, not naturally given; 2. Space reflects power relations and class structures; 3. Urban space is a site of ideological control; 4. Lived space holds emotional and symbolic meaning; 5. Conflict emerges when conceived space overrides lived space; and 6. Spatial transformation is often linked to capitalist development. By foregrounding these tenets, Lefebvre's theory enables a reading of spatial destruction as political intervention. The demolition of homes thus becomes a deliberate restructuring of social life, not merely an urban event.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space provides a powerful framework for understanding the demolition scene in Ovo Adagha's "Homeless." The story begins with an ordinary walk home from school, yet even this movement through the city reveals how space structures inequality. The narrator describes navigating "angry car horns" under a "midday sun… blazing down from the skies with unrestrained hostility" (Adagha 169). The children walk barefoot while "several cars bearing other schoolchildren drove past us" (Adagha 170). This contrast dramatizes what Lefebvre calls spatial practice (the daily routines through which social hierarchies become visible). Space here is not neutral; it differentiates bodies according to class. As Lefebvre insists, "(Social) space is a (social) product" (xii). The children's burning feet and exposure to traffic are not accidents but consequences of economic displacement.

The neighbourhood itself is rendered through a vocabulary of decay: "a steady ooze of odor that emanated from the slime-drenched gutters" and "putrefying carcasses of dead animals" (Adagha 171). The home is "a rag-tag assembly of wood, zinc and misshapen clay bricks" (Adagha 171). These descriptions construct the settlement as materially fragile yet socially dense. Within Lefebvre's triad, this environment represents lived space which is imbued with affect, memory, and resilience. The narrator confesses, "I had learnt long ago not to be proud of my home" (Adagha 171), recalling how classmates laughed when she disclosed her address. The shame attached to location shows how space becomes symbolic capital. As Edward Soja notes, "space is never innocent; it is filled with politics, ideology, and other forces shaping our lives" (6). The ridicule she faces reveals how spatial stigma disciplines the poor.

The story's turning point, i.e., the arrival of bulldozers, marks the violent intrusion of conceived space over lived space. The machines are described as "agents of destruction" that "swung around in a vicious circle, pulling and knocking down buildings" (Adagha 172). The language transforms urban planning into militarized assault. Lefebvre argues that modern states privilege abstract, administratively controlled space over experiential space, often erasing the latter (49). The demolition embodies this principle. There is no dialogue, no legal explanation; only mechanical force. The naked woman who screams, "Kill me!" before her hut is crushed (Adagha 172), performs the extremity of dispossession. Her body becomes the final barrier between authority and shelter.

Scholars of urban displacement describe such events as structural violence. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights defines forced eviction as removal "without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection" ("Forced Evictions and Human Rights"). In "Homeless," there is no sign of compensation or relocation. The family "only stayed because we had

nowhere to go" (Adagha 173). Their lack of mobility underscores what David Harvey terms "accumulation by dispossession," a process through which vulnerable communities are displaced to facilitate redevelopment (159). Although the story does not state the economic motive behind demolition, the sudden clearing of land suggests urban restructuring at the expense of informal residents.

The narrator's mother exemplifies the intimate impact of spatial violence. She moves "with a fierce wild look… like that of a hen whose brood of chicks were being threatened" (Adagha 173). Her frantic gathering of possessions: "clothes, cooking utensils, books, earthenware and pieces of furniture" scattered in the rain (Adagha 173), illustrates Lefebvre's claim that lived space "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (39). Each salvaged object carries memory and continuity. When the shack is finally shoved aside, the narrator opens "my mouth in a soundless scream" (Adagha 173). The silence emphasizes the magnitude of loss: spatial destruction has exceeded linguistic expression.

The aftermath scene intensifies the sense of erasure. The neighbourhood becomes "a tragic exhibition ground of twisted wreckage" (Adagha 173). The comparison to war—"It looked like a place flattened by war" (Adagha 173)—links demolition to military devastation. Space once animated by routine now resembles a battlefield. Lefebvre argues that abstract space reduces complexity to homogeneity (287). The flattened ground exemplifies this reduction: diverse homes are transformed into uniform debris. The vultures "waiting patiently by the corner" (Adagha 173) symbolize opportunistic systems that profit from ruin.

Importantly, the narrative voice remains child-centered. The brother's earlier innocence: "He was yet to know the difference between being poor and rich" (Adagha 173), contrasts sharply with the catastrophic awareness produced by demolition. Spatial violence thus becomes a pedagogical event; it teaches class difference through trauma. Ato Quayson observes that African narratives often "stage the encounter between the individual and the social system in ways that reveal the pressures of history on everyday life" (2). Here, the social system materializes in bulldozers. The children's domestic world collides with state power.

The title 'Homeless' encapsulates Lefebvre's insight that the destruction of space disrupts identity. Home is not merely structure but social relation. When the narrator observes her mother in the rain, "her back hunched in despair," she confesses, "I knew that I could never name the color of her pain" (Adagha 174). Pain here is spatially grounded; it arises from dislocation. The erasure of lived space produces emotional homelessness before physical relocation occurs.

Thus, through Lefebvre's perspective, "Homeless" dramatizes the production and destruction of urban space as a political act. Spatial practice (barefoot walking, kiosk labor), lived space (memory, shame, attachment), and conceived space (bulldozer-led redevelopment) collide in a moment of violent transformation. The story exposes demolition not as neutral modernization but as spatial domination. By narrating displacement from within, Adagha restores visibility to those rendered invisible by urban abstraction. Space, in this text, is both the medium and the weapon of power.

This study has argued that Ovo Adagha's "Homeless" powerfully dramatizes spatial violence through the propositions of Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. By foregrounding demolition as a political act rather than a mere urban event, the narrative reveals how space is socially produced, controlled, and ultimately erased. The family's shack (constructed from "wood, zinc and misshapen clay bricks") functions not only as shelter but as lived space saturated with memory, labor, humiliation, and hope (Adagha 171). When bulldozers reduce this space to rubble, what is destroyed is not simply architecture but belonging itself.

Through Lefebvre's spatial triad, the story exposes the conflict between spatial practice (the children's daily barefoot walk, the mother's kiosk labor), lived space (emotional attachment and identity), and conceived space (state-driven demolition and urban order). The violence of this clash underscores Lefebvre's insistence that space is ideological and political. The bulldozers embody abstract, administrative power; the residents represent embodied, experiential life. Their displacement reveals how vulnerable communities are rendered disposable within processes of urban restructuring.

"Homeless" situates structural injustice within intimate perspective. The child narrator's confusion, fear, and silent scream transform urban theory into human experience. The demolition scene becomes a moment of pedagogical awakening, where class difference and state authority are learned through trauma. In portraying this erasure from within, Adagha restores narrative agency to those silenced by spatial domination.

The story affirms that spatial violence is never only material; it is existential. By illuminating how lived space can be abruptly annulled by power, "Homeless" challenges readers to reconsider the ethical dimensions of urban transformation and the human cost of abstract development.

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