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A LEAP IN THE DARK: SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN HELON HABILA'S *TRAVELERS*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the blind steps taken by African youths to salvage their socio-economic conditions as they think that Europe has the answer to their unwarranted dilemmas and so must get there either by hook or by crook. Helon's Travelers alludes to one of the most perforating socio-historical quandary faced by migrants both on their way to Europe and in Europe itself. The postcolonial theory is suitable in this work, especially as Helon's work is not mere dogmatic proclamations, but an extended metaphor on the austere life of migrants which has been one of the challenges that the postcolonial world is grappling with. There is a strong connection between the incidences in Helon's work and the realities of everyday experience of migrants. A thorough analysis of the predicaments of migrants in their attempt to enter Europe and their stay in Europe and how such attempts have persisted overtime shows that African youths are yet to attain a critical consciousness on the idea of hoping for an alternative life in Europe. An investigation into the persistent attitude of African youths towards travelling to Europe reveals that there are socio-political instigators prompting many to seek an alternative life elsewhere. Therefore, there is need not only for reorientation and sensitization but also for urgent policy attention.

KEY WORDS

Illegal immigration, Refugees, Exile, Socio-political instability, Censorship

RESEARCH PAPER

INTRODUCTION

One of the dominant aspirations of the postcolonial society is to ensure a meaningful life without sinking into the snares of neocolonialism. However, the postcolonial society still leaves much to be desired in her attempt to secure the future of the postcolonial population, vis-à-vis the challenges of its socio-political network. Hence, individual attempts at providing solutions to some of the postcolonial quandaries becomes a subject of concern as some of these attempts end up as severe blunders. To this effect, this article seeks to prove that Helon Habila's *Travelers* allegorically signals one of postcolonial topical concern which is the feeling that the postcolonial subjects can only make life meaningful if they go back to live and work in the countries of their former colonisers. The article also investigates into the socio-political backgrounds of immigrants, thus, establishing a connection between the experiences of immigrants and the unhealthy factors that account for the self-implicating decisions to evacuate their homelands. As a critique on the blind steps taken by African youths and the socio-political energies that account for such slipups, this article provides more meaning to Habila's version of migrant experience. Although the study of migrant life has been the subject of various critical concerns, this article seeks to investigate the unavoidable tribulations of immigrants that could be traced through a complex trajectory, beginning from the moment they leave their homelands, their various journeys through different places and final destination in Europe. Thus, specifying that many Africans are yet to attain a critical perception of seeking an alternative life in Europe. The travelers, as the title of Habila's work suggests, are not actually travelers but mere tramps in the real sense as they live a life of restless wandering. They are hardly stable because of their unhealthy conditions and their yearnings for a better life is often greeted by acrimonious unexpected circumstances. Their lives become characterised by endless suffering and each critical experience only gives birth to a direr situation. Unfortunately, the more these individuals run away from suffering, the more they get closer and entangled in it. Conscious of this problematic, Habila paints a veritable picture of migrant life relating to daily experiences as evident in contemporary society, and the socio-political dynamics that account for the blind steps taken by young people to salvage their socio-economic conditions. There is a correlation between incidences in Habila's work and socio-historical realities of the postcolonial world and the problem of migration has been a major preoccupation in the agenda of postcolonial writers and critics. It is in this respect that the postcolonial theory becomes appropriate in the analysis in this article.

This article presumes "A Leap in the Dark" as a metaphor for hostile unanticipated circumstances, which raise questions on the functioning of the postcolonial socio-political network and reinforces the susceptibility of the postcolonial populations. Habila's *Travelers* is a disconcerting interrogation of the persistent attempt by African youths to displace themselves from their countries of origin for a presumed promised land with no idea of what they will confront in the process. In fact, Habila presents a multifarious convergence of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and students, who are all ascribed second class citizen positions in Europe. Legal immigrants assume illegal status the moment their papers expire. As a result, they are pursued, arrested and deported. Through digression, flashback, dialogue, stream of consciousness, the experiences of immigrants are communicated to the readers by Habila. Though a contemporary writer, Habila alludes to the historically forged dichotomies of

superior/inferior complex as immigrants are attributed subaltern status in Europe. The saying "home is home" appears to be a shadowy but most penetrating motif in Habila's work, as immigrants' experiences always give the impression they would have been better off had they remained in their home countries with everything being equal. The fact that migrants leave their home countries with the intention of making it in exile is a complex issue and George Lamming puts this better in "The Occasion for Speaking", when he speculates that: "When the exile is a man of colonial orientation, and his chosen residence is the country which colonised his own history, then there are certain complications" (Bill Ashcroft et al, 2003, 12-13). Conscious of this challenge, Habila engages not only the experiences of immigrants in Europe but also the unhealthy factors that inform their entanglement in such experiences. However, as far as the idea of improving personal wellbeing is concerned, Europe remains the new haven to most postcolonial populations, especially African youths.

An appraisal of Migrants' experience on their journey to Europe

The idea of making it in Europe remains a lingering assurance in the minds of African youths who think that their dreams could be fulfilled only in Europe. Habila's narrative records some of the most throbbing experiences of migrants from the postcolonial countries who attempt to reach Europe illegally. In reading Habila's work, one categorically feels austere with the hazards that migrants are confronted with in their quest for an alternative life, given that their experiences away from home as they seek entry into foreign lands are neither appealing nor desirable. The physical and even psychological spaces between homeland and final destination of migrants are characterised by indescribable suffering. The comprehensive rendition of the horrible and frightening experiences of migrants is proof of Habila's intention to create awareness and to debunk the flattery stories human smugglers recount to entice young people to undertake journeys that bring misery not only to the individual but to the entire family. The consequences of yielding to smugglers range from prolonged suffering, imprisonment, split of families to painful death. Apparent in the stories of each individual's experience on their way to Europe, which are related to the audiences through retrospection, is a persistent theme of unimagined anguish. Habila takes it as an urgent obligation to inform the public not only on the ordeals of immigrants in Europe but on the nuisances that are encountered on the dreary and perilous journey to Europe. Apart from hunger, fatigue, temporary detention accompanied by severe torture, the travelers face life threatening situations that lead to loss of lives. More social consequences such as dispersion of relatives are evident as families are scattered in the forest or at sea in case of attacks and shipwrecks.

Through dialogue, we get to know Karim's story, which does not only reveal his personal nightmare but also the tribulations of other migrants he meets on the way. Karim is one of the characters with very pathetic story in Habila's *Travelers*, originally a citizen of Somalia. Due to circumstances beyond his control, he leaves Somalia for Yemen, where he is registered as a refugee with UN assistance. To survive, he has to engage in illicit cigarette business and human smuggling, a risky business that claims the life of his boss: "…Othman start doing more people smuggling, and he want me to join him. I will not lie to you, I did join him for a time…" (Habila 175). Karim is a humble and responsible father and husband who unfortunately has become a victim of socio-political instability. Unexpectedly, he compromises his family principles even against his wife's wish in order to survive. "…then my wife become unhappy" (175). Apart from poor living standard, Karim entangles himself into another problem that would add to his moving

round the world in search of a solution. His son falls from the fifth floor and breaks his leg and lack of medical facilities in Yemen causes him to leave with his family and heads for Syria, where he works as a kitchen assistant in a hotel. A job that gives him the opportunity to get rejected food to feed his family: "Food is not a problem. I got plenty food from the hotel. Food they want to throw away…I said no, I will take it" (176). This depressing life of a scrounger, is the enduring consequence of leaving his homeland, which unfortunately, has been the experience of many migrants. From Somalia, Karim has been wandering with his family from one country to the other before venturing to Europe through the forest.

The final destination is always Europe, which according to many migrants, is the land of glory that would end their suffering. This misconception is what accounts for the risk taken by most migrants. Karim is not exempted as he engages the long tedious journey through the forest to get to Europe with his two sons: "Finally we decide we will go by foot to Bulgaria" (179). Through digression, we are informed of more disturbing situations evident in the story of a poor woman Karim has met in the forest, who has come with her son in search of her husband's grave: "She say she was looking for her husband grave. He died when they tried to cross into Bulgaria with human smugglers. He just fall down and died" (Habila, 173). Fatigue, exhaustion, dehydration resulting from the long journey are some of the inconveniences that claim the lives of migrants in the forest. The trauma resulting from the death of loved ones in this perilous journey is often unbearable, especially as they are often buried in the forest where their families would hardly trace their graves. Through digression, more ugly experiences are revealed by Karim. While narrating his experiences in the forest, Karim suddenly moves to what happened to his son in Yemen, "My story also is sad, but I have seen more sad stories in my travelling. My boy he broke his leg in Yemen. And you know all his dream is to become a football player" (173). His unfortunate displacement from home has cost his son his leg and shatters his dreams. The adoption of digression emphasises Karim's predicaments, showing that his experience has been marred by horrible incidences.

Indeed, before engaging the forest and the sea to reach Europe, some migrants go through hell the moment they live their homeland. Juma, a young Nigerian leaves his country under very disturbing circumstances and finds himself in a refugee camp in Niger with thousands of others under severe conditions: "And every day people die like flies. You would see a child today, playing in the dirt, tomorrow they'll tell you he died in the night" (286). Juma finds conditions in the camp agonising and joins nine others across the Sahara to Lybia, where the few of them who survive the excessive heat are greeted by the Lybian police with arrest. Lybia is remarkable for its strategic position and most illegal migrants have to pass through Lybia before crossing through the Mediterranean to Italy. But the experiences they face in the hands of the Lybian security agents are usually very pathetic. After falling into the hands of the police, death by torture becomes imminent and escape impossible: "…to survive, we had to drink our own urine, or that only six out of the twenty men locked up in that room eventually made it out" (287). In this quotation, Habila lays credence to some of the horrible images of migrants suffering in the hands of Lybian security agents circulating on both public and social media, which recently shocked the world with the degree of inhuman treatment of migrants. Recently, many Africans including Cameroonians were stuck in Mexico faced with horrible conditions. This reality of migrant life, creates an image of passing through inferno.

Despite the horrendous experience, many youths still portray a persistent spirit of moving to Europe, which to them is the ultimate destination to end suffering and Juma is no exception: "…I was able to save up to a thousand dollar after a year…I had to keep moving. I found myself

in a group getting ready to cross the Mediterranean for Europe" (287). The boats that carry most migrants are owned by smugglers whose main mission is to make as much profit as possible. For this selfish reason, the state of the boat is never their concern and the estimated consequence is sinking and inevitable loss of lives. Tragically, Juma's boat finally sinks and almost everyone on the boat perishes with only a few survivors: "Later, I learnt, that of over three hundred of us who left Lybia that mourning, only me, the man, and the girl and five other people survived" (289). Consequently, families are not only separated on a temporary note but permanently by death in the course of seeking a better life. A man and daughter are saved but his wife and other children perish in the waters. This unfortunate incidence among others constitute the unanticipated situations that migrant entangle themselves in as they seek alternative life out of home.

Similarly, we encounter a helpless woman and her baby on the sea shore in Italy, who are survivors of a shipwreck that caused their separation from her husband and daughter. Due to loss of memory, she is tricked by her rescuer, who takes advantage of her unfortunate situation: "We were lovers, many years ago. I visited your country. We met. We fell in love" (225). Unaware of any memories of her past, she becomes convinced: "She believed him, she said I am sorry…He leaned forward and kissed her lips" (226). Consequently, she becomes the wife of a complete stranger, while her husband and daughter are still looking for her in Berlin. After regaining her memory, she recounts her ordeals at sea with her family: "*Have you ever been on a refugee boat?...The boat was really nothing but a death trap, an old rickety …that should have been retired a long time ago…Some who were down below the hold…died within hours of our departure-the children and the pregnant women died first"* (229). She creates an impression of pain when she poses the following rhetorical question: "Have you ever been on a refugee boat?" Loss of lives become a routine at sea where dead bodies are fished out of water on daily basis due to smugglers' callousness and insensitivity to human life. To give credibility and attract a wider audience to his narrative, Habila relates to historical facts. He alludes to the well-known 2013 shipwreck that caused the death and disappearance of hundreds of migrants: "…when in 2013 he saw in the news, with the rest of the world, the bodies of over three hundred migrants fished out of the Mediterranean in the nearby island of Lampedusa" (220). This horrible historical reference appeals to Habila's imagination as a potent reminder of the painful experiences of illegal migrants on their way to Europe and subsequently Europe itself.

Europe and hope deferred

After going through all the unimaginable tribulations on their perilous journey to Europe, the migrants think that arriving Europe is a sign of victory, however, the realities of life that await migrants in Europe are far from what they could imagine. Habila summarises their frustrations in the following words: **"**We think this is the end of our journey, our suffering is over. But we don't know this was just the beginning of our bad luck" (Habila 180). In Europe, they live mainly in refugee camps, detention centres and dilapidated buildings long abandoned for their unhealthy nature with very poor social conditions. This despairing but unmistakable reality raises questions about seeking an alternative life in Europe and provokes the spirit of conscientisation which is patent in Habila's narrative.

One of the problems faced by illegal immigrants at the border is the unavoidable arrest. Karim and his group are no exception: "As we got to the Bulgarian border the border police come out and arrest us" (180). The socio-political situation of Somalia has caught the attention of many writers as they reflect on the refugee condition of its citizens who have found new

settlement in most European countries. In "A Refugee Diaspora: When the Somali go West", Marc Antoine Perouse, speculates that:

> *The out-migration of the Somali during the 1990s has coincided with the clamping down on asylum procedures across the industrialised world. As the decade has progressed the Somali has been forced to find new methods and routes for entering the West, often illegally. One outcome has been the Somali increasingly find themselves in precarious situations in host countries (New African Diaspora, 46).*

Habila uses Karim to x-ray the complex situation faced by Somalian refugees. The plight of Somalian refugee in Europe in general and Germany in particular, is a reality that has not escaped Habila. His engagement in portraying socio-historical realities is proof of his consciousness of the happenings in the socio-political landscape of Africa and the fate of refugees in Europe. The criminal status ascribed to immigrants is evident in the way they are greeted with arrests at the European borders, which is always the commencement of nightmare as their new accommodations are either in refugee camps or detention centres, where they are exposed to all sorts of life risky conditions. In Italy, for instance, they are encamped in old dilapidated buildings that have been "abandoned to wild goats and rodents" (Habila, 200). To make matters worse, the camp that is meant to hold five hundred refugees is actually holding beyond its capacity. That explains why toilettes have been transformed into rooms, where migrants spend their nights: "…it was overcrowded as usual, it was meant to hold five hundred people, but it always had over two thousand migrants….Toilets had been converted into sleeping spaces. It was either that or you leave" (202). In the same way, in refugee camps in Bulgaria, men are kept in "small tiny rooms" (181).

Besides, feeding problems become a daily nightmare for the immigrants who are bound to face the adverse effects: "And Mahmoud, he doesn't like the prison food and he has been having stomach problem since we came here, his back is all covered with rashes and we have no doctor, no health workers" (185). Refugee camps are nothing but dungeons, claiming lives of immigrants on daily basis: "People die in their rooms from sickness and there is nothing anyone can do for them. Every day they take out dead bodies" (185). Though Karim is fortunate not to have perished in this horrible camp with his children, he likens it to prison: "Finally we leave that prison" (186). The prison metaphor ascribed by Karim to the refugee camp is not farfetched. As a refugee, he has had his own dose of the appalling experiences in the virulent refugee camps in Europe, where the dreams of many are shattered by the degradable and life threatening nature of the refugee camps: "*last night the man, boy really, on the bed next to mine was screaming in his sleep, and this morning he refuse to get up, he lay there staring at the ceiling. He is no more than twenty…always talking about his journey across the desert and his prospects in Europe"* (206). This is evidence of inattention to human predicament, where the consequence is devastating to the refugee who becomes a victim of European conception of the 'other'. The refugee camps are nothing but death traps for immigrants, whose lives appear to have less value in the face of the Europeans. This reality is a practical example of the consequences of blind decisions that result in shattering the dreams of young people and loss of lives contrary to expectations.

Apparently, in all of Europe, the refugee camps are all the same with unpleasant neighbourhoods good only for the vagrants of the society. From Bulgaria to Italy, Britain, Germany and Switzerland, we are presented with horrible sites as refugee camps. In *Travelers,*

David, Portia's elder brother, a pitiable character who leaves his family at the young age of nineteen, arrives Switzerland and is taken straight to a refugee camp:

> *When your brother first came in Switzerland he was staying in a refugee hostel outside town. It is old building near a farming village, nobody was staying in the building so they give it for refugee, it is remote, far from town, and the refugees were not allowed to go anywhere, not church or library, or public buildings. It was a new law* (106).

In terms of setting, it is evident that the refugees are encamped in isolated areas far from the city inhabited by the natives. This is an indication that the refugees are of inferior status and consequently should not live in the same neighbourhoods with the whites. Not only are refugees segregated upon in terms of setting, their accommodation camps are more or less like prisons as they are treated with disregard to human right principles.

The second class citizen position assigned to immigrants is reflected beyond refugee camps. Legal immigrants also live in very unappealing neighbourhoods with abandoned dilapidated buildings. Mark, Stan, Eric and Uta are examples of some of those who have had their own dose of European alienation of immigrants:

> *He (Mark) lived in Kreuzberg with his three friends Stan, Eric and Uta, in an abandoned building next to the river Spree. The church was tilted, as if a fingertip push could topple it, one of those crumbling buildings you occasionally saw around Berlin, spared by the war and overlooked by the demolition ball looking odd next to the newer structures* (15).

Beside the unhealthy nature of Mark's dwelling place, he looks frowzy and miserable: "He looked a bit of a mess, almost feral, his black converse sneakers were dirty and worn out" (18). Mark is not the only immigrant in this condition as evident in the despicable picture the narrator paints of immigrants and their neighbourhoods: "At the main building entrance, a huddle of men, dirty, unshaven and visibly drunk….The smell hit us even before we entered the building: fetid and moist and revolting. This was the most un-homely place I had ever seen" (57).

In fact, the image painted of immigrants show that they are the outcasts of the society with limited means to take care of themselves. Drunkenness is a recurrent theme in *Travelers* and immigrants are always the constant victims who drink out of frustration. Their consciousness of the horrible environment makes them devise ways of coping with their morbid conditions through fantasising: "It is littered with cans and plastic bags clinging to the base of the building…the inmates, especially those with children…gaze at the slate-made skies enjoying a moment of quiet, pretending they are somewhere else, not at a Heim in a strange city thousands of miles away from home" (82). Unfortunately, the life most immigrants dream of is hardly available as they exist as shadows in foreign lands with little hope of realising their dreams. Katarina Schamm's comment in "Leaving Area Studies Behind: the Challenges of Diasporic Connections in the Field of African Studies" on "…the displacement, suffering, adaptation or resistance" (6), only goes to enhance the painful experiences of displaced people who find themselves in Europe.

Not only are immigrants' neighbourhoods deserted and irritating, the natives compound this hostility with their upsetting racial attitudes evident in verbal tantrums and unnecessary suspicion. It will not be an overstatement to assert that racial bigotry is an inexorable cankerworm that has persistently characterised European attitude towards immigrants. Cognizant of it pervasive nature, Habila has chosen to hit hard on this Social vice that has eaten deep into

the European society, not only by delineating some whites as advocates of racial bigotry but by giving poignant details of immigrants' lives conditioned by racial practices. In his *Travelers*, migrants are the most targeted and tangible victims of racial intolerance in Europe.

Apparently, the ill-disposed attitude of Katharina's friends towards her and her husband, a black, shows that they still cling passionately to beliefs of racial superiority. Their indiscreet approach towards Katharina could be seen in these sarcastic questions they ask about her husband: "What did you guys talk about all the time? Did he even know how to use a fork and a knife? (154). Such embarrassing curiosity only shows that they have a horrid propensity for racial bigotry. This phenomenon is reminiscent of what happens in *Manchester happened*, where an African called Abbey falls in love with a white girl called Heather and other whites grow impatient with such relationship: "Once an old white man spat in Heather's face….He pretended not to see when white people gave heather dirty looks" (Nansubuga, 56). The immigrant is viewed as uncivilized and underserving of accommodation in white community. Racism still persists in Europe despite the much talks against racial chauvinism in this century.

As a result, some blacks seek to secure their stay in Europe by engaging white women in marriage. After his arrest and subsequent deportation to Mali, David's return to Switzerland, is facilitated by his first marriage with Brigitte, where he succeeds in getting his papers and a job in a rail station. Thus, raising himself to the status of a citizen beyond the subaltern status he had before. His marriage with Brigitte could not last due to Brigitte's intolerable attitude, who continued to see him as a black with inferior standards. She wanted "too much to be in charge all the time and Moussa's life became a living hell" (110). As if what he experienced in the hands of Brigitte was not enough, he falls in love with Katharina and they get married afterwards. Due to racial complications, the marriage is characterised by constant fights which implicate his life. His experiences in the hands of the two white women he got married to show that black and white relationships are sometimes very strenuous due to prejudices that interfere in their attitude and impression about each other.

Moreover, the whites overtly portray their indignation against immigrants showing they are not welcomed in their society. Katarina Schramm, corroborates this view in her description of immigrants' experiences in "Leaving Area Studies Behind: the Challenges of Diasporic Connections in the Field of African Studies" when she says: "…catastrophe, coercion, violence and trauma became the major characteristics of Diaspora…" (5). The whites harass migrants' neighbourhoods, calling them "fucking illegals", asking them to "go back" (Helon, 270). This is evocative of an incident where Karim complains about his room in a refugee camp and receives the following responds from an official: "If you don't like our accommodation, you can go back to your country" (182). Similarly, in a Berlin–Turkish café, the owner turns away black people claiming they are "all illegal immigrants and drug dealers" (24). They compel black people to live with culpability; questioning their dignity in public as a demonstration of their moral superiority complex. This suspicious attitude persists as Mark laments that: "Women hug their bags when I am in the vicinity…" (43). Such misgiving attitude gives the impression that the white women see the immigrants as people of doubtful moral rectitude. To corroborate this suspicious attitude of whites, the narrator relates a similar incidence that happened to him in America: "I had approached a policeman at Penn Station to ask for direction…and as I got closer to him I saw his hand inching towards his gun at his waist." (43). The unnecessary suspicion of immigrants is a demonstration of racial insolence on the part of the whites. It is regrettable that such humiliating degradation faced by immigrants is a fact evident in contemporary Europe. Nkem Okoh validates this view in "Appreciating the field of African Literature", when he states:

"…there is considerable western denigration and stereotyping regarding the African continent and its peoples as virtually every student will find his field replete with such prejudices and biases" (843).

Consequently, some immigrants grow impatient with the alienation, discrimination and complete cut off from the mainstream socio-political setup and react to such degrading attitude. Portia is one of such immigrants whose impatience with white racial attitude causes her to confront Katharina, the wife of her late brother. After his demise caused by another failed marriage, Portia, on request of her mother, visits Katharina to find out what caused her brother's death. She uses the occasion to accuse her of killing her brother. On a second occasion she enquires grotesquely, if her brother was not a victim "of your anger and jealousy. Of the whole system of Europe" (146). The last phrase "Of the whole system of Europe," has a subtext, which denotes the racial attitude of Europeans. Portia has lived in Europe and her experiences are enough to make such inferences. It is Portia whom we are told has "read in the papers about people being thrown out of moving trains by skinsheads for being blacks" (155). The refugees find it difficult to integrate themselves in the socio-political setup since they have been relegated to the margins of the society.

European reaction to courageous and conscious immigrants who question the socio-political maneuvers of the European society show proof of intolerance and hostility. After being rendered as the dregs of the society, Eric, a young student expresses his frustration with the present situation: "We believe there should be an alternative to the way the world is run now" (20). Beside Eric, Uta decries the capitalist nature of the society where there is "too much money in too few hands" (20). Provoked by their appalling conditions, they wonder what is going on in the present century: "This is the twenty first century no child should be dying of hunger or disease (20). Through protests, these students set out to condemn white racial attitude alongside capitalism and the exploitation of the African continent. Annia Lumba in "Situating Colonialism and Postcolonial Studies", hints on the new form of colonialism characterised by capitalism: "…modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe…modern colonialism did more than extract tributes, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered-it restructured the economy of the latter…In whichever direction human and materials traveled, the profits always flowed back to the so-called 'mother country'" (*Literary Theory: An Antholoy*1101).

In fact, Lumba confirms the reality expressed in the following: "This is the twenty first century no child should be dying of hunger or disease" (20) Migrant students are conscious of this nuance and seek to redress it. However, the outcome of such moves which is random arrest and beatings is an indication that the migrants' right to speak out is not recognised. J Maggio throws more light on white efforts to mute the subaltern: "Like a child torn between two…parents, the subaltern are silenced even when attempting to speak…always framed as a quisling or resistant. Its own voice is never heard" (425). If in contemporary Europe, we are still presented with migrants' situation in this bleak manner, then, one cannot help but agree with Isidore Dialo, when he states in his "Biblical Mythology in Andre Brink's Anti-Apartheid Crusade", that: "In the Whiteman's myth, slavery is an inalterable destiny" (83). In line with racial prejudice portrayed in Habila's work, there is no doubt that the whites are still laden with the conviction that they can continue subjecting the postcolonial populations into slavery through exploitation and oppression.

The hostile experiences of immigrants which go contrary to the expected life they long for when they live their homeland, plunge them into confusion and frustration. Their frustrations are

captured in the persistent snifter motif evident in their constant presence in bars soaking themselves in beer as a source of solace. Early in the novel, we meet the unnamed narrator and Mark in a bar, where Mark takes more than required and is almost hit by a car: "He walked with a swagger, at one point he casually stepped into the road…weaving between cars…ignoring loud curses that came from incensed drivers (18). As young as the immigrants are, their lives are immersed in alcohol which they take to drown their misery: "A boy, his face red with drink, his girlfriend tugging at his arm, flopped into a bench next to us" (27). Getting stable jobs is a daunting task for immigrants and when they suffer joblessness, alcohol employs them: "He (Jonah) lost his job…he has tried everything. Now he has stopped trying. He watches football and he drinks" (170). Jonah's addiction as indicated by his wife is a consequence of frustrated life of immigrants in Europe. Due to racial difference, a section of the society is suitable only for certain jobs with meagre salaries. Alejandro A. Vallega puts this better in "Displacements- Beyond the Coloniality of Images", when he posits that: "Finally, based on race and salary, a hierarchy develops that places those who deserve wages in an epistemically privileged position with respect to possible knowledge. With these brief steps a system of domination/exploitation based on race/color has been configured…" (*Research in Phonology*, 214). In the same light, Glenn C. Loury further stipulates in *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, that:

> *Numerous indices of well-being-wages, unemployment rates, income and wealth levels, ability test scores, prison enrolment and crime victimization rates, health and mortality statistics-all reveal substantial racial disparities. Indeed, over the past quarter-century, the disadvantage of blacks along many of these dimensions has remained unchanged, or, in some instances has even worsened (4).*

The prevalence of racial prejudice in Europe gives credence to such speculations as seen in the above quotation. Loury's deep reflections on racial disparity stems from his fears that such disparity would persist for a long time. He then calls on the audience, himself included to reflect on "what can and should be done" (4).

Moreover, the type of jobs assigned to immigrants are sometimes very demeaning. Manu, who has been a doctor in his country is serving as a doorman in a nightclub, where he suffers from the cold climate and hunger. "He is hungry he feels weak…,Part of his job is to hold the door for them as they come out trying to orient their senses to the cold, sometimes he helps them find their cars if they can't find it by themselves" (73). As people who are ascribed second class citizen positions, the nature of jobs available are always demeaning no matter your profession. Robert Ford validates this when he ascertains that: "Africans are less likely to be employed and most likely to work in worst jobs, live in worst houses… than white Britains" (26). An explanation to this phenomenon is articulated by Ali Rattansi, in *Racism: A very short Introduction*, as follows: "…the lower races were regarded as being impulsive, emotional, and unable to engage in the abstract reasoning that was the preserved of the white…This type of analysts allowed a variety of other groups to be denied full civic and political status…" (33). This gives credence to the fact that racism is an inexorable nuance that has stubbornly handicapped the European society. Due to unfulfilled life, a life that can best be described as absurd, most immigrants start being nostalgic about their homeland.

Through dialogue, characters make certain revelations amongst which is the nostalgic feeling for homeland. In a discussion with the narrator, Karim, a Somalian refugee in Munich, reveals how at one point the suffering became so unbearable that he craved for his homeland: "I

was afraid, I was tired. I miss my home and I miss Mogadishu and my shop and my simple life selling little thing with my family." (Habila 178). karim has been operating small scale business before the outbreak of political instability in Somalia. The unexpected reality of exile causes him to think of his home nostalgically. Like the others, he wishes he would have returned to his country had the wobbly political situation waned**.** Nostalgic feelings continue to persist in him as each day ushers in nothing but misery. In a refugee camp in Europe, awful conditions trigger his memory and he ponders on the fact that he would have progressed a lot had the socio-political stalemate in his country subsided:

> *"I always think that what if we are back in Somalia and everything is okay, and we are living in our small house with our shop. My daughter Aisha, who is almost nineteen now, she would have been married, and maybe I will be a grandfather. Fadel would have started taking over my little business by now, and maybe, we will have another shop by now. But here we are in this place and we don't know what will happen to us today or tomorrow"* (185).

The realities of exile weighs heavily on individuals and the feeling of returning home becomes imminent. Another character, Juma, also becomes nostalgic after suffering without food for two days and finally stumbles on some apples in an uncompleted building: "I remember all the fruits I ever ate growing up, the mangoes, the bananas, the melons, the pineapples, I wanted to go home. The longing for home was so strong, I could feel it in my stomach" (277-278). However, Juma's longing for home is only temporary as he sees such a sensation as a moment of temptation: "It was a moment of weakness. I never allow myself to indulge in anymore" (278).

Curiously, some immigrants are scared to go back home despite the horrible situations in which they find themselves in Europe. That is the complex part of dealing with migrant situation and demands an urgent investigation as well as urgent intervention. Early in the novel, we meet Mark, a migrant from Malawi, refusing to go back to his country. He continues to tally in Europe after the expiration of his visa: "He was only technically speaking a student, his registration had expired-something to do with school fees,…which was why he was squatting with friends in the old church in Kreusberg" (18). Mark's girlfriend confirms the fact that Mark dreads going back home "is the worst thing that can happen to him. He cannot go back" (21). In a similar vein, Portia narrates the story of a man and his family, escorted by immigration officials for deportation, who threatens to commit suicide: "Is it because I am Muslim, because I am not white? You send me back to die? My blood on your head…I kill myself before I go back" (109). It is evident that some immigrants prefer the second class citizen status with all the consequences rather than going back to their countries which might be worse than Europe.

Besides, a more critical example is evident in the story of the Nigerian immigrant who swears he would rather die than allow himself to be repatriated. His defiant attitude could be seen in his prolonged hunger strike in an attempt to force the English government to grant him asylum: "He has been on hunger strike for months, and swears he'd rather die than be deported" (255). Although his hunger strike has made him popular, it has not influenced the authorities to reconsider their decision to deport him. On the contrary, they choose to ignore him and persist in their callous attitude towards immigrants as they attempt to force food down his throat in hospital. Likewise, James Kariru's unwillingness to return home despite the fact that his wife and children have chosen to return shows his passion for exile: "He had become something of a professional exile. He went from fellowship to fellowship, from asylum city to asylum city. All

over Europe" (Habila 134). Even as a self-exile, who leaves in search of a space to nourish and bring to light his objective imaginations, he still comes back shattered and empty. Vinay Lal, corroborates this when he resonates that: "…an exile in which the labor was rendered more difficult, more poignant, marked by the 'sense of dissonance engendered by estrangement, distance, dispersion, years of lostness and disorientation" (111). As a writer at loggerheads with the status quo, James Kariku, goes on exile in order to be free from political persecution as a writer. However, he returns a disoriented individual shattered by exile, a place where according to his daughter is just "limbo" (132). The experiences of Portia's father complement and at the same time contradict the narrator's view that: "I know every departure is a dead and every return a rebirth. Most changes happen unplanned and they always leave a scar" (Habila12). His departure is really a dead but his return is not a rebirth.

Ostensibly, most immigrants leave under very horrible and controversial circumstances with the hope that on their return, they would either improve their lives or meet a better home to accommodate them. However, we can attest that in most cases, they are caught up in the middle because the moment they leave their land of origin, their destination becomes dreadful and their return hopeless, making their suffering endless. James Kariku, one of the complex characters in Habila's work is an example of those whose lives have been conditioned by exile. Kariku's attitude of insisting on going back on exile reveals a new consciousness suggestive of the fact that he is no longer comfortable with his once cherished homeland. His homecoming is not a rebirth but the opposite, as he dies barely two months after his return evident in his wife's lamentations: "I made a mistake. I shouldn't have pressed him to return. Exile was his life. The returned killed him" (139). He becomes disillusioned because he meets the same condition that has triggered his exile as revealed in the phrase found repeatedly in his writing "Down with dictatorship" (139). With continuous threat to life back home, many immigrants endure all the hardship in Europe feeling sacred to come back.

Socio-political dynamics

> *What do deportees feel: relief, shame, anger? Surely, they must feel relief to be away from all that European suspicion and alienation? And yet, some of them, no sooner do they arrive than they begin to plot their return. It is as if some homing device, focused toward Europe, is implanted in their brains and it never stops humming till their feet are on European soil* (Habila109).

Migrants' experiences and reactions are sometimes complex and difficult to comprehend. These "homing devices" in the above except can be located through investigative responses to this curious question, which is, why many "chose the wilderness of exile over home"? (Habila 214). Unfortunately, homing devices that help people to trace their homes are rather working in the opposite, where individuals choose to leave home for foreign places. Socio-political dynamics in the home countries of immigrants account for the blind decisions taken by most young people who myopically think that Europe has the answer to their unanswered questions. Through flashback, each individual reveals the circumstances that account for their displacement from homeland to Europe. Their stories give the impression that while some people are forced to leave because of socio-political violence, others are just fed up with their socio-economic conditions and decide to seek alternative ways of improving their conditions and Europe becomes their

ultimate destination. Family and religious differences also account for the displacement of many who find themselves among those involved in the compelling rush to Europe.

Socio-political instability, resulting from bad governance and the desire for change through armed conflicts has been the major cause of migration in Africa with overwhelming consequences. Due to insecurity, some people who had better jobs at home find themselves in Europe, doing demeaning jobs, which only add to their suffering and provoke indignation against their countries of origin. Manu, one of the characters in *Travelers* with awful experiences as a refugee in Europe, has been a medical doctor in his homeland but finds himself in Germany, working as a doorman in a nightclub: "Part of his job is to hold the door for them as they come out trying to orient their senses to the cold…" (73). The curious irony here stems from the fact that Manu leaves behind a noble profession of medical doctor in his home country and embraces the demeaning job of a doorman in a nightclub in Europe, where he is regarded as a second class citizen. However, he is kicked out of Lybia by political stalemate which has caused many to desert the land: "I was the only doctor left for miles around…I took the kids to school as usual and the gate was closed. Not even the guard was there. That was when I knew it was time to go" (90).

Persecution resulting from oppressive leadership remains a daily experience in Africa, pushing many to languish in exile. A woman, who was so prosperous in her country, is reduced to a miserable tramp in exile because of harassment from her home government: "I already told you the story of a woman, who was once a rich person in her country, Eritrea….Those who knew her said she had lost everything to the government of her country when she escaped. Houses, cars and her husband was arrested" (Habila 292). Despite the reluctance of some people to leave their home countries, they finally have no choice when life becomes risky for ordinary people in a war situation. The migrants relate pathetic stories that account for their presence in Europe with enduring consequences. The realities about Africa that account for the predicaments of these refugees which are given attention in Habila's work, show he is a keen observer of the socio-political landscape of the postcolonial society, who fulfills his assignment as a writer of conscientisation by recording details of the hitches threatening his society.

Like Manu, many are also victims of socio-political insecurity: "In 1990 President Siad died and overnight Somalia descended into political chaos. Time passed. Fractions organized around family ties and tribal loyalty divided the country into fiefs overseen by warlords. And thus begins Karim's personal nightmares" (168). A young rebel, guided by tribal prejudice, falls in love with Karim's ten year old daughter, and subsequently threatens him with gunshots. This makes Karim and his family victims of both political and tribal persecution, causing them to leave behind their possessions to become wanderers in foreign land with all the hostilities. In the same way, the story of the woman rescued at sea with a baby, reveals that she ran away from her country to save her family from political violence: "Have you ever been on a refugee boat? Pray you never. Pray your country never breaks up into civil strife and war, that you are never chased out of home" **(**229). From her story, she is unmistakably a victim of socio-political circumstances. As victims of circumstances beyond their control, the stories of these migrants suit what John D Barbour describes in "Edward Said and the Space of Exile", as "… narrative of involuntary travel" when describing Said's childhood experiences as an exile.

Furthermore, writers are victims of strict censorship by Machiavellian rulers, who persecute them for their critical perceptions. James Kariku, Portia's father, gets "into trouble with the government because of his writings, not just his poems, but articles as well, in the

newspapers. He was something of a rising star, I guess. Some people saw him as a possible future candidate for the presidency" (Habila 132). Critical writings have always been intense causes of political persecution, thus, his poems and articles, mainly criticising bad governance and corruption, are not to be taken lightly by an obnoxious regime. Faced with imprisonment and threats on his career, he heeds his wife's advice of leaving the country. He is among the fortunate writers who "escaped into exile to spend the rest of their lives in limbo" (Habila 132). Portia's description of exile as limbo, creates a negative impression about exile. Her father's final demise as indicated by her, is also connected to his meaningless life in exile. Persecution of writers by obnoxious regimes is a historical issue which continues to pervade the postcolonial society. Habila uses Kariku to represent postcolonial writers who have spent a significant part of their lives on exile due to their critical writings. In South Africa for instance, writers and their works were banned and many sought refuge in exile. Among these writers are Zakes Mda and Bessie Head, who wrote works that were critical of the apartheid regime. By the 1960s, the innovations in writing were slowed down by government's continuous repressive actions which caused most of the writers, artists and/musicians to go on exile. The famous African writer and critic Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is noted to have spent twenty two years on exile because of his writings that were critical of the status qua. A significant number of postcolonial writers live in exile, where they have the latitude to expand their works without persecution from their home governments.

Apart from political persecution, religious persecution is also a serious cause of sudden displacement. Apparently, Juma leaves Nigeria under very disturbing social and religious circumstances. According to his story, related in a letter to the narrator, he was a teacher in Nigeria and his school was attacked by religious extremists who were opposed to western education. The principal of the school was killed alongside his entire family. Juma's parents had no choice than to escape: "That night our village was attacked…. My old father came to my room told me to run. He handed me a little package, in it was all his life savings" (284). After wandering from country to country and in the Sahara and Mediterranean, he finds himself in Europe, where his worst nightmare begins. It is evident that many young people who dream of Europe are sometimes pushed by existing circumstances beyond their control.

Basically, some individuals become fed up with the precarious socio-economic situation and decide to go abroad in pursuance of a better life. Moussa, whose original name is David is not only an apostate who rejects his religion but also an embittered fellow who rejects his family and country: "I…wish I could tell you. He wanted another father, I guess another family" (150). With such utterances coming from Moussa's sister, it shows that David, now Moussa has actually wished to be far away from his family. He leaves home at a very young age of nineteen for South Africa, where he suffers detention for one year. No sooner has he returned home from South Africa than he starts plotting his departure for Europe. He finds himself in Mali where he is adopted by a Muslim family who finds him stranded at sea. He then changes his name and nationality and becomes not only a Malian but a faithful Muslim. From Mali, Moussa heads for Europe to better his life and that of his new family. His suffering and final demise in Europe are indications of futile adventures undertaken by myopic youths. Through retrospection, we get to know of a young Nigerian who leaves his home country with high expectations to make it in Europe. The narrator meets this young man in a refugee camp in Italy among many others from different countries and his assurance about getting to Europe to better his life baffles him: "*He was poor and felt he stood no chance in his hometown of ever achieving the good life, so his mother sold their land and gave him the money to pay his way across the Mediterranean"* (214).

He is driven away by unbearable economic conditions and like the others, he ingenuously believes that Europe would salvage his precarious economic conditions.

Conclusion

Habila's narrative captured in the multiple voices and experiences of individuals at different time frames depicts the inexorable nature of the ugly situation of migrants that has persisted over time. The plight of migrants begins from when they live their countries, through various places before finally entering Europe, where their conditions only exacerbate. Habila's narrative, contradicts the hunky-dory impression smugglers create in frustrated youths about Europe. He ensures this by exposing the horrible experiences of migrants both on their way to Europe and in Europe itself. The fact that some migrants express regrets show that they venture into what they do not have full knowledge of. It is essential for African youths to be more prudent in decision making, especially when it concerns their future, as well as there is need for urgent sensitization and policy alertness. Habila's message could be understood that the time is ripe for Africa to reconsider her socio-political policies in order to preclude the blind steps taken by most Africans to move to Europe. He also has a message of tolerance and humanity to the Europeans whose attitude towards immigrants depict coldness to their plight. Thus, this article gives momentum to Habila's work, which intends to debunk the flattery stories by traffickers to entice young people to think that Europe has the answer to all their problems. The crucial experience of migrants evident in Habila's work is "…an issue demanding both our attention and a problem calling for a resolution" (Decolonising the Mind 4).

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