

**‘VIRUS OF DEPARTURE’: MIGRATION AND (DIS) ILLUSION(MENT) IN
TAHAR BEN JELLOUN’S *LEAVING TANGIER***

Prof. Ifeyinwa Ogbazi

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

Okache C. Odey

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
co.odey@stu.unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The dispersion of people from countries in Africa to the West is usually triggered by socio-political and economic dislocations and the quest for a better life elsewhere. The paper looks at how Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel, *Leaving Tangier* captures migration, illusion (an idea or assumption that may not be true in reality) and disillusionment. The concern of this paper is to examine how migration can shatter illusions and change the perception of individuals in a foreign country. This paper draws from Paul Gilroy’s postcolonial concepts to explore the social realities of African immigrants in post-imperial Spain. The paper concludes that migration to Western countries is not really a solution to the condition of poverty in Africa and also, African political leaders must provide the enabling environment that will curb outmigration from the continent.

Keywords: Migration, Illusion, Disillusionment, Postcolonial Melancholia, Conviviality

Introduction

People leave their homeland to other places for reasons such as socio-political and economic crisis, famine, war and a quest for a better life. Disillusionment with the socio-economic realities of one’s homeland could create the illusion that the grass is greener in another place and this is the normative perception among many Africans. So across the continent, year after year, Africans are leaving in droves to the West with the hope of a better life because according to Taiye Selasi their “countries hurt them” (240). The postcolonial situation in many countries in Africa, according to Maximilian Feldner, is driving “African migration movement, which, albeit is often caused by constrained circumstances, is largely voluntary, as many Africans leave homes to seek work and better opportunities elsewhere, particularly in the United States and Europe” (15).

There is the illusion by many Africans that life is far better in the West and that the continent offers a bleak prospect and so they migrate to western continents especially Europe and North America in order to reorder their lives. Endalkachew Hailu Guluma argues in his essay that “Disillusionment is often rarely defined as its meaning is often taken for granted. As the word indicates, there is an ‘illusion’ and there is a failure to realize or achieve that ‘illusion’ resulting in disillusion.” (75)

This paper, therefore, examines the illusion that is birthing the flight to the West by many Africans and the disillusionment these Africans experience as they negotiate their place in the host country. The host country is not usually how they perceive it to be and that is the root of the disillusionment that many African immigrants experience in Europe and the United States of America. Chinua Achebe asserts that the dreamy African immigrant discovers that “Europe has made no real provision for his participation. That discovery that one is somehow

superfluous is there, waiting at journey's end, for the weary traveler from the provinces" (98). The realization that the dream of the good life is largely unrealizable usually breaks the spirit of many African immigrants in the West as they face the stark reality of being an outsider in a foreign land. Huggin writes about "the painful dislocation immigrants experience as they live removed from home in a place that treat them as 'Others.'" (24)

In many African Diaspora novels, the protagonist never remains the same as a result of the barriers to assimilation he encounter as he tries to integrate in a foreign land which is akin to Paul Gilroy's assertion in the *Black Atlantic* that the personalities of individuals are altered as a result of migration. The diaspora space (between leaving home and settling in the new society) usually purges the immigrant of illusions as he is shaped by his experiences as Avtar Brah argues that "by memories of what was recently left behind and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learn to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities" (201) of the host country.

Tahar Ben Jelloun is a Moroccan novelist that captured the issues of migration, illusion and disillusionment in his fictional work. The central characters in his novel flee their homeland with the hope of a better life in Spain and as Feldner observes that just like other new African diaspora fiction that:

These novels illustrate the transcultural identities of protagonists who move between different societies, cultures, and language. They depict the present of the migratory experience, which is connected to the past through the memories of the migrant's country of origin and to the future through the hopes for a better life in the new country. They suggest the feelings of displacement, uprootedness, and unbelonging that can be and often are the consequence of movement, and that can lead to alienation and to a loss or splitting of identity. (107)

Tahar Ben Jelloun in *Leaving Tangier* explores in the fraught drama of Mediterranean migration and personal frustration (that is commingled with the notion of hope) which drives it. As one of Tahar Ben Jelloun's characters expresses it, "Yes, Spain, France, whatever, I'm already living there in my dreams" (2). The fascination with Spain and France is largely due to the fact that Morocco was divided between the two European countries in 1912 and it was not until 1956 that the Kingdom became free from the two foreign powers. So it is understandable when the central characters in the two novels leave Tangier, a port city in Morocco, to Spain according to Paul Gilroy "The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there." (100) or like Virinder Kalra, Raminder K. Kaur and John Hutnyk opine that "In the post colonial context, the reason for the presence of racialized group has to do with the colony past" (26).

The migratory characters in the novel flee their homeland because they anticipate a bleak future and when they arrive in Spain, they are not given a pleasant welcome from those who were 'once out there' to visit them when they decide to reciprocate the gesture and this paper draws from Paul Gilroy's theoretical concepts of postcolonial melancholia and conviviality to explore the spatial space between the post-colonial citizen and the their former colonial master.

The characters in the North African novel reveals that moving to Europe is fraught with challenges as a result of racism, loneliness, difference and many other barriers to assimilation as they try to settle down in Spain. These barriers may lead to disillusionment as immigrants according to Edward Said "deal with or lived in a culture so profoundly different from their own" (260). The novel also in certain ways, counters the assumption by many Africans

especially Nigerians that migration to Europe is a solution for the harrowing poverty they experience in their home countries.

This paper examines migration, illusion and disillusionment in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier* by drawing from Gilroy's theoretical concepts of melancholia and conviviality. The paper draws from Paul Gilroy's postcolonial concepts of melancholia and conviviality which examine the social realities of immigrants in post-imperial Britain and postcolonial cities elsewhere. Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier* can be interpreted by employing Gilroy's concepts of postcolonial melancholia and conviviality. Melancholia and conviviality are concepts introduced by Paul Gilroy to interpret diaspora issues which are hinged on difference of the 'Other'. Melancholia according to Gilroy in Britain's and other post-imperial countries is "intensified by feelings resentment, rejection, and fear at the prospect of open interaction with an otherness, which could only be imagined as loss and jeopardy" (102). Again to Gilroy it is the feelings of aggression, guilt and fear directed at citizens of former colonies by citizens of ex-imperial countries as a "response to diversity, plurality and differentiation" (109).

Gilroy refers to conviviality as "the process of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (xi). Gilroy argues for solidarity among people in multicultural societies all over the world to be recognized as human irrespective of differences and for all former colonial powers should come to terms with the brutalities of their colonial past.

'Virus of Departure': Illusion and Disillusionment in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier*

Leaving Tangier is 2006 novel by the Moroccan novelist, Tahar Ben Jelloun that recounts the story of a Moroccan brother and sister who both migrated to Spain in search of a better life. At the heart of the novel are issues such as taking leave of one's homeland, loneliness, deception and disillusionment.

In an illuminating 2011 essay "Immigration, Literature – Monde, and Universality: The Strange Fate of the African Writer," the Congolese writer and academic Alain Mabanckou alludes to the shift in African writing "from a literature campaigning to recover an identity... to an introspective literature concerned with the condition of Black people around the world" (75). No contemporary novel illustrates Mabanckou's thesis more acutely than Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier*. Even though Ben Jelloun, as a Moroccan émigré writer, may not strictly be regarded as depicting "the condition of Black people", his themes in the novel- migration, disillusionment, exile, adopted identities – are of a piece with those of a writer like Tendai Huchu. The irony of Ben Jelloun's narrative is that it is inspired by a Moroccan enclave, Tangier, that has historically been a haven for European and American artists, radicals, and outsiders; in other words, individuals seeking to escape the strictures of Western life.

The novel is a tale of two individuals frustrated by the socio-economic and political woes of their country and who both eventually migrated to Spain. The major and marginal characters in the novel are all deeply obsessed with moving to Spain with the hope of a better life. So to one of the central characters, Azel: "Leaving the country it was an obsession, a kind of madness that ate him day and night... leaving, abandoning this land that wants nothing more to do with its children, leaving to save your life, even as you risk losing it" (15). In the novel, the idea of migrating to Spain is an obsession with many characters and Azel extends it even to a cat that is always trying to jump into a ship heading for Spain:

About his stubborn desire to get out of Morocco. Even the cat was fed up: he, too, wanted something else from life. The cat wanted to go away because he knew instinctively that it was better “over there,” and he had his obsessions like everyone else, coming stubbornly every day to try his best to jump onto that vessel bound for Europe. When he encountered the cat, he greeted him as if he’d been human. “So you want to leave as well, you’ve caught the virus of departure too, haven’t you - you don’t feel at home here, where you’re mistreated, kicked, you dream of a better, more comfortable life in a big bourgeois house.... Hey, don’t give up, you’ll get there someday.” (36-37)

The obsession with migrating to Europe to Azel is like a virus that has not only infected him but it seems nearly everyone including animals. Kenza, Azel’s sister and Siham his girlfriend are also “surrounded by young people who thought of only fleeing, leaving, working anywhere at all” (74). They are all hopeful of a better life ‘over there’ in Spain. Azel’s dream of migrating to Spain is realized through a chance meeting with a wealthy Spaniard Miguel who saves him from beating by two attackers. Miguel’s chance rescuing of Azel though magnanimous at first is not entirely an altruistic act as events later will reveal.

Why, then, did Miguel want to tear Azel from his own world to take him home to Spain? At first, he wanted to help Azel. Only after seeing him a few times did he realize that a fling or even a serious affair was possible. He loved the ‘awkwardness’ of Moroccan men, by which he meant their sexual ambiguity. He loved the olive sheen of their skin. And he loved their availability, which marked the inequality in which the relationship was formed, for the lover by night was thus the servant by day. (40-41)

Azel’s relationship with Miguel brings to light the political and economic inequality between Morocco and Spain during the colonial and postcolonial period. Miguel travels just like his forebears to the Orient to realize his desire. It shows the exploitative nature of the incursion of Europeans countries in Africa and also a reflection of Said’s observation of the sexual appeal of the Orient to Europeans: “Just as the various colonial possessions – quite apart from their economic benefit to metropolitan Europe – were useful as places to send wayward sons, superfluous population of delinquents, poor people, and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe.” (190)

Azel realizes that sticking with Miguel will get him to his dream life in Spain so he exploits their relationship fully. His obsession with leaving Morocco at this point shows that he is ready to do anything. Just like Faten, Azel is ready to offer his body to enter Spain. Through Miguel, Azel is able to travel to Spain legally unlike the migratory characters in Lalia Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. So rather than travelling in a dangerous way by a rickety boat across the Mediterranean Sea, Azel arrives in Spain by boarding a plane. Kenza also travels to Spain legally through an arranged marriage to Miguel.

In Spain, Azel and Kenza’s illusions begin to dissolve. It takes Azel just a little while to realize that “the paradise he’d dreamed of couldn’t possibly resemble a little attic room in a big villa, or this loneliness that was keeping him awake” (71). In one of his letters to his country, he says, “I’m in my little room, it smells musty in here; there’s only one window and I don’t dare open

it. I admit that I'm disappointed...wiped out by fear, the fear of what's new, of not being able to cope" (71). Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier* shows the fate of African immigrants who travel to Europe with the hope of a better life and finding instead, a harsh and difficult environment. Azel and Kenza migrated to Spain because of the socio-political and economic walls in their country Morocco that they could not break down in order to realize their dreams only to confront other walls in the host country.

Azel amorous relationship with Miguel has a damaging effect on his sexual performance with Siham and his mistress Soumaya. He also discovers that "Europe doesn't want us. Islam frightens them. Racism is everywhere" (72). While Miguel is welcoming of immigrants, many Spaniards are not and their responses to immigrants come in various forms like anxiety, fear, hostility and violence which are what Gilroy refers to as postcolonial melancholic. Azel and Kenza and the other immigrants encounter hostility from citizens of the host country because as Kwame Anthony Appiah rightly asserts "difference always carries some risks of creating ill-will" (94). Azel eventually parts with Miguel in an acrimonious manner and that begins his spiraling into the abyss of despair. He finds the atmosphere in Spain unbearable as he can no longer access the good things that Miguel provides him. He gets to a point where Madrid is not different to Tangier. He becomes disillusioned with Spain and he realizes that his dream "was broken beyond repairs" (231) Azel's experience in Spain buttress Isidore Okpewho's argument about the divergent experiences of African immigrants in the Europe and the United States that "some eventually attain their goal; the rest are broken by despair" (22). The disillusionment of Azel in Spain places him in the category of those Okpewho argues are "broken by despair." In a bid to put together his disintegrating life, Azel decides to spy on a terrorist group in Spain for the Spanish police, a move that will get him beheaded by the group.

Kenza fares better in Spain because she is able to adapt unlike her brother but after she discovers shocking information about her Turkish lover, Nazim, it shatters her illusion about love and life in Spain. The fate of the two siblings opens the eyes of their benefactors about the life of an immigrant. "Miguel now realized that there was something terrifying about the loneliness of immigration, a kind of descent into a void, a tunnel of shadows that warped reality. Kenza had let herself be caught in the maze, and Azel, well, he had gone desperately wrong. Exile revealed the true dimensions of calamity." (243)

Miguel is both a force of good and bad in the life of the siblings. Just like his country colonial past in Morocco, Miguel brings both order and disorder to Azel and his sister. He provides the notion of Gilroy's concept of conviviality which is the possibility in postcolonial Western societies to celebrate diversity and cohabitation of people in a multicultural society without becoming anxious, violent and fearful of the other. Miguel understands just as Appiah opines "the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association" (xvii). His interaction with Azel and Kenza is devoid of hostility, fear and anxiety because he is much at home in a multicultural society. He does not consider difference as reason for fear or violent but an opportunity to value otherness.

Tahar Ben Jelloun's characters in *Leaving Tangier* are largely disillusioned with their life in Spain and just like in Morocco, they are people "who have not found their place in life" (252). While in Spain, Azel finds his dreams "broken beyond repair" his sister's life is "shaken, and some memories have fallen free like fruit from a tree" (256). They escape walls in Morocco that stand between them and their dreams only to find different dimensions of walls in Spain. Tahar Ben Jelloun explores migration as a site for change and also, where immigrants' illusory perceptions of Western countries are sometimes shattered. And the characters are shaped in

different ways by their experiences. The novel is important in shaping how we think about migration and the dream of a better life in Europe.

Conclusion

Leaving Africa for Western countries is now an obsession for many people in Africa especially in Nigeria. It is like many Africans, to borrow Azel's words have 'caught the virus of departure,' a burning obsession with fleeing the continent. The significance of Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel is that it draws attention to the reason why Africans are fleeing and what governments across the continent must urgently do to keep their citizens from embarking on a dangerous pursuit of a better life in the West. Political leaders must tackle the roots of despair that is birthing the exodus of Africans to Western countries.

This paper suggests that Gilroy's concept of conviviality which is simply an acknowledgement of diversity or the recognition of otherness in multicultural societies as demonstrated in the interaction between Miguel and the Moroccan siblings in *Leaving Tangier* will bring about a more inclusive society in post-imperial countries such as Britain, Spain, Belgium and other postcolonial countries.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Home and Exile*. London: Heineman, 2000.
- Appiah, Kwame. Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Appiah, Kwame. Anthony. *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*. London: Profile Books, 2019
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culutre*. New York: Routledge, 1994
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diapora*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Cooper, Brenda. *A Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material, Culture and Language*. Scottsville University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008.
- Feldner, Maximilian. *Narrating the New African Diaspora: 21st Century Nigerian Literature in Context*. Graz: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Gilroy, Paul. *(After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Guluma, Endalkachew. Hailu. *Disillusionment as Central in the Lives of the African Diaspora: The Case of Two Ethiopian Diaspora Novels*. *EJBSS*,2 (1) (2019): 71-88.
- Higgins, MaryEllen. *From Negritude to Migritude? MoussaSene Absa's Ainsimeurent les anges (And so Angels Die)*. *Film in African Literature Today*, 28, (2010): 24-25.
- Helen, Yitah. and Okyerefo, Michael.P.K. *Migration, Cultural Memory and Identity in Benjamin Kwakye's The Other Crucifix*. *Diaspora and Returns in Fiction*. *African Literaure Today*. 34, (2016): 82-101.
- Kalra, Virinder, Raminder K. Kalthon, Hutynuk John. *Diaspora and Hybridity*. London: Sage, 2005.
- Jelloun, Ben Tahar. *Leaving Tangier*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Lalami, Lalai. *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. New York: Harvest Book, 2005.
- Mabanckou, Alain. *Immigration, Literature-Monde, and Universality: The Strange Fate of the African Writer*. *Yale French Studies, Francophone Sub-Saharan African Literature in Global Contents*, 120, (2011): 70-80.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *Introduction: Can We "Go Home Again"?* In I. Okpewho and N. Nzegwu (Ed) *The New African Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London. Penguin Books, 1978.
- Selasi, Taiye. *Ghana Must Go*. New York: Penguin Press, 2013.
- Thomas, Dominic. *The Global Mediterranean Literature and Migration*. *Yale French Studies, Francophone Sub-Saharan African Literature in Global Contexts*, 120, (2011): 140-149