

## A Canvas of Trauma: Borderline and Migrants' Demotivated Choice in Helon Habila's *Travelers*

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### Abstract

In a world where paper identity and its attendant complexities supersedes the supposed fundamental human rights of a people; an environment where documentation takes preeminence, as it helps to objectify these categories of humans or individuals, due to some established principles, there exist an unhealthy gap of subjugation and discrimination towards the targeted. However, 'paper' here, serves as a metaphor and a tool for discrimination against African migrants. Admittedly, the experiences of African migrants in the diaspora have taken a new narrative, as recent studies highlight cases of what may arguably be termed *voluntary slavery* in the form of care-givers, security service, cleaners and laundry services with barely nothing or little stipend just to keep surviving. Hence, despite their qualification(s) and exposure they are constantly experiencing issues of borderline and subjugation for being blacks in Europe, as they are subjected to jobs that contradict their status. Thus, literary writers seek to examine the experiences of African migrants, within broader contexts of identity, psychology and self-dignity. Helon Habila's novel, *Travellers*, interrogates these experiences through certain characters, who at one point or the other navigate their paths, despite the various impediments faced in Germany. Trauma theory is used to explore and investigate the study, it helps to highlight the effects of their living conditions on them in the society, while revealing how these African migrants go through their experiences in the diaspora, where they are constantly discriminated against due to race, class and unexplainable prejudice.

**Keywords:** Migrants, Trauma, Menial, Borderline, Subjugation

### Introduction

The recent exodus of African migrants to Europe calls for a great concern, as Clement Abaziem Okafor laments that "brain drain has over the years created a second African diaspora in America and the Western world" (28). However, majority of these migrants cannot ascertain their level of survival in the diaspora, still, they yearn for it. It has become a neo-culture, which have encapsulated the vision and mentality of many young Africans especially, as the movement to them, is like a dream come through, despite its negative factors. Hence, there is a high level of desperation, betrayal, criminalities and other vices by these migrants, who are quite eager to get Europe without minding the unreceptive nature of these 'foreign' environments. Hence, Abigail Oaikhena asserts that:

It is often believed that the grass is greener on the other side, but in reality nothing good comes easy, especially in an environment full of racial and class boundaries. It becomes more traumatizing when smart and intelligent young African university graduates, with hopes and dreams, are lured into Europe with promises of juicy jobs and flamboyant lifestyles, only to be subjected and coerced into odd jobs like taxi driving, gardeners and prostitutions, in order to make ends meet (2)

So, the recent culture of relocation which has engulfed Africa and invariably Africans, spurs a huge surge of despair and traumatic feelings in the psyche of many African migrants, due to their ordeals and horrible experiences during their illegal crossing of the deserts and Mediterranean Sea to Europe. However, in Europe they are treated as refugees and destitutes, without proper placement or regard in the society. There is a constant interplay of racial, class and social discriminations among the natives and migrants. This further heightens their trauma, as they are consciously subjected to all kinds of menial jobs and low lives, despite their highly respected professions.

### **Trauma Theory**

Thus, trauma becomes a center of focus for migrants' discourse, as it shows how migrants navigate between survival and death in their day-to-day living while in the diaspora. Trauma, as it is popularly known as a Greek word, is seen as visible wound, which usually refers to the physical pains. Consequently some recent studies theorist like Cathy Caruth and Sigmund Freud, known for his psychoanalysis theory, decides to elaborate and view it as a psychological injury, which can affect and occupy the psychic of victims. Again, when been triggered, there is a conscious and unconscious *bleeding* in the dispositions of these traumatized victims.

So, trauma, according to Richard Mollica, is the "nonphysical but social and psychological injuries to the mind and spirit" (36), as she aligns with Charcot and Freud's work, that trauma is not limited to a 'physical wound,' but carries within it notions of a 'psychic wound' as well. Cathy Caruth coins the phrase "inherent latency" to describe the traumatic effects on individuals, as she means that "the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs but returns to haunt the subject of experience through repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (qtd, Hanna Meretoja, 24). However, Caruth's perception further settles Judith Herman's view that trauma is an event that "overwhelms the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (*Trauma* 1992: 33). It affects their sense of belonging and self in the society.

Conversely, Bryan T. Reuther, sees trauma from his concept of cognitivism, as he opines that "the cognitivistic paradigm dominates in psychological and psychiatric diagnostic conceptualization" (439). In anchoring his discourse of on behaviorism, he believes that victims feel and react immediately to their experiences. But this does not eradicate the fact that the pains are no longer there, as for Leys, traumatic experiences "imprinted itself literally on or into the subject's mind and brain" (304). Hence, Caruth adds that "traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot" (Pederson, 334). The feeling of their experiences live with them for a life time, invariably affecting the society generally.

Helon Habila's *Travellers* traverses every aspect, especially the grey areas of migrants' lives, their exilic experience and ordeals while seeking for better life in the diaspora. Their hopes and dreams are usually short-lived, as all odds are often against them, due to those unconsciously acceptable social idiosyncratic structures that exist in the western world, ranging from racial discrimination to language to class and most importantly, the issue of citizenship also known as paperwork. According the author, "paperwork trail was always as tangled as Bob Marley's hair" (34). Predominantly, the text focuses its concern on African immigrants who are straggling or straying from one region and country to another in search for their life fulfilment in Europe.

Worthy of note is that, in the novel, Habila portrays the different kinds of exiles, like self-exile, conditional exile, unconscious exile and emotional exile. The characters of James Kariku, the unnamed narrator, Manu, Juma and Mark represents these types of aforementioned exiles respectively. They are just souls on the showcase of Germany, exhibiting their colours as determined by the society without their 'approval'. Ironically these exiles are like journeys of no return, as they get 'lost' through death, imprisonment, detention, love affairs, and other supposed civic or social regularities and adjustments.

### **Discourse**

#### **Social Subjugation of African Migrants**

There is a constant 'look down' on the blacks, irrespective of their status and profession in the western world. This usually elicits anger, protest, self-definition and assertion in form of unrest by the blacks, who seek for equal rights and privileges, as Mark puts it "this is our Sharpeville, Our Agincourt" (65). However, the uncivil reactionary measure of state police, is the random shootings of these angry immigrants who are only seeking for their pride of place in the 'unbalanced' or unequal society. Thus, Mark asks "do white people always assume every black person travelling is a refugee?"(42).

The attitudinal disposition of the white natives, which informs Mark's question, forms the base of this research. African immigrants are consciously relegated, a form of psychological torture and abuse, just

to make them feel inadequate and less human. The character, Muna, was a medical doctor in Libya before relocating to Germany. He confirms this in his conversation with Angela, as he puts “I was a doctor. A surgeon” (87), but he is, now, a club bouncer in order to feed. According to the narrator:

He is so hungry he feels weak. Stay awake, he whispers, stay alert, that’s all you have to do for two hours. He forces himself to imagine the clients staggering out, flush with drunk and dancing. 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 car if they can’t find it by themselves.... He shivers again and take another drag on his cigarette. He is not a smoker, he got this from his partner, the Turk, but neither is he a doorman, or a bouncer, or a Berliner, but here he is, holding the door, bouncing, smoking cigarettes, in Berlin.... He is lucky to have a job at all... (73 & 74)

This is the most unfortunate part of African immigrants’ life in Europe, they are daunted with hunger and bills till they succumb to accept any offer thrown at them by the government. They engage them with menial jobs, jobs rejected by the natives, jobs that are below their educational qualifications and social status. Like the case of Muna, he is not given a chance to show his skills and expertise as a medical doctor but now a club bouncer, opening car door for clients, while also directing them to their car. Muna’s trauma here is what Matthew Ratcliffe perceives as a “world that appears bereft of salient possibilities for meaningful action” (15) towards immigrants. Apparently, in the text, the level of social subjugation in Europe is very high and detrimental towards the blacks. The Narrator, again, recalls a woman and her child, waiting in the sitting room, as Gina had already done a painting of them. He says that:

Last week she had drawn a lady and her four-year-old daughter.... She would also love the woman’s hands that tightly clutched her daughter’s arm, they were dry and scaly, the nails clipped, no doubt ruined while working in some hotels laundry room, or as a scullery maid (5).

This is the state of many migrants, they are usually seen and treated as slaves, as they strive to survive in these western countries. They are sometimes under paid for their services, as they lack the ‘strength’ to protest and complain. The authority cares less about them, hence, they are socially subjugated. Hence, they can be seen as the targeted migrants, who seek to survive, while roughly navigating their paths in the midst of stringent established laws and immigration policies upon them.

### **The Traumas**

The case of the unnamed narrator, a Nigerian, is the climax of the novel. A supposed PhD student in America, who travelled to Germany with his American wife, Gina, for her Zimmer Fellowship but they drifted apart due to some unexplainable differences in their marriage, while in Germany. The narrator stayed back in Germany, he meets Portia, a Zambian girl, who is saddled with her family responsibility of finding the cause of her brother’s death while in exile and her late father’s belongings, who died immediately after his forceful return from exile. At the drastic twist of events, the same narrator is seen languishing at a border in Italy, for misplacing his bag, containing the papers that grant him permission to live in Germany, and mistakenly taking the wrong train in search of his papers. He is frustrated and disconnected from ‘life’. From an omniscience point of narrative, it recalls that:

Now Matteo noticed how frail the man looked, with the wind flapping his baggy shirt and pants, threatening to sweep him over the offence and into the sea.... This one, he came to my office two weeks ago. He was not a refugee he said. His documents went missing and he ended up on the train by accident. I don’t believe him of course. You get such stories every day. (204)

He is traumatized as a result of his personal suffering in Italy, while also, seeing how immigrants constantly get drawn in the sea and their bodies being washed up at the sea shores daily. The poor living state of the few survivors in the camps is horrible, - “it was never a pretty sight: some had feet rotting in their wet shoes, some had shit and vomit caked to their skin and hair...” (201). He is mentally and psychologically drained, as he become self-unconscious. Lost in thoughts and holding on to nothing in life. That is why, when he is asked where to go, he gets confused about whether to go back to his wife in America, the fling he had with Portia at Berlin or to his poor anxiously waiting mother in Nigeria,

who is expecting every good thing in life from her son, a supposed PhD student in America. Due to his level of unconsciousness, he could only notice how dirty and tattered he looks, till when he drives with Matteo around the town. In his laments:

After the market is a line of stores selling clothes and ladies' bags and shoes. The clothes on display make me self-conscious about my own tattered clothes; I have been wearing the same things for weeks now and I must look like a scarecrow.... Come let's have coffee, Matteo says.... There are a few men and women sitting at nearby tables, most of them stare curiously at me as we sit down (209)

So, like every other African immigrant, his dreams and ambitions is becoming a mirage, as they are constantly thwarted by circumstances orchestrated by the society. Africans go to Europe with hopes and dreams for a better future. According to Gayatri Spivak it is a "Eurocentric migration... border crossing, the seeking of political asylum..." (245). Hence, they embark on the risk of crossing the Mediterranean Sea despite the horrors involved, as Juma narrates his experience while crossing the sea, that "all around were people struggling, floating, screaming. Children floating past, and their mothers, belly-up before sinking, plastic slippers, bowls, books, briefly floated" (288). So, a journey of over three hundred only about ten of them survived.

Again, crossing through the desert and forest, is as horrible as the sea, like the story Karim Al-Bashir is narrating to the narrator of "a woman and her daughter" (173), later in the same story, it is now "the woman and her son" (179), showing that Karim could be lying in order to steal his document while in the train. Nevertheless, the story has it that, in the forest as they are crossing to Bulgaria from Turkey, they saw a woman and her daughter/son, "they are looking around.... She says she was looking for her husband grave. He died when they tried to cross into Bulgaria with human smugglers. He just falls down and died. The smugglers help her quickly to bury him in the sand. ...she come to say *du'a* for him, to pray for his dead body" (173). As pathetic as the story sounds, it is the real experience of migrants, this is what majority of them go through to meet their 'certain' misfortune end in Europe.

The unnamed narrator confirms that African immigrants' frustrations and failures are certain in Europe. Yet he can helplessly admire their determination and optimism, as he insists to the young Nigerian he meets at the camp in Italy, according to him, "I admire his optimism, which inevitably, will get shattered, it is impossible that it won't but I still admire it" (214). This is the fate of the majority, like himself. He is left with nothing, just struggling to be among the living daily without thinking of the luxury of good living or to owe property. He has only a backpack given to him by Matteo, as he reveals that "all my worldly possession are in there, a pair of pants, some underwear, the book *The Leopard* by Tomasi di Lampedua" (234).

Also, in the novel, the character Juma, is a traumatized Nigerian running from one apartment to another, avoiding the immigration officers and police who are after him. According to the narrator, "his asylum application failed and he was about to be deported when he escaped..." (224). At first, Juma's movement to Europe is terrifying, based on his encounters, from desert to the Mediterranean Sea. He actually left home due to Boko Haram attack on his community in Nigeria. Now, he is being hunted by Nativists, "Nativists had finally traced him to our building, and what we saw downstairs was a standoff between them and the anti-nativists" (255). Juma embarks on hunger strike to express his dissatisfaction on how he is being treated, unfortunately, his action does not matter. They finally arrest him, put him in detention without trial, at the end; the narrator puts:

He shrinks, he regresses, back to childhood, curled up in a corner foetus-like, his flesh withers, his bones become as frail as twigs. One day the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor. The cleaner comes and sweeps the twig and bags them and throws them into the dumpster. (295)

Like rodents, black lives are easily terminated at any given opportunity in Europe, disposed and forgotten. Juma died dishonorably, his carcass is swept and discarded into dumpster like trash. The German government feels no remorse for stripping a human of his fundamental rights, as he is being

treated less than an animal. No decent burial or funeral ceremony is conducted or observed in his honour. Nothing shows he was a human. As a black man, he is treated like a nonentity.

### **The Foreign (Caucasian) Wives**

Another aspect Habila depicts in his novel, is the role of black migrants' Caucasian wives, the 'foreign' women in their lives. In the novel, it is obvious that these women, see these African men as tools for support and growth, and discard of them when they are no longer servicing their interest. They disconnect them from their families back home in Africa, by making their lives to revolve around them alone. This again, is the case of the unnamed narrator, who has not spoken to his mother and family members is over a year, since he meets Gina, his American wife. He laments that:

I hadn't spoken to my mother in a while. When I first got to America I used to call her every Sunday, talking through five-dollar call cards, the phone being passed from her to my father, to my sister and my two brothers. The plan was for me to return after my PhD, but then I met Gina, and the days turned into months, and the months into years, and then I just stopped calling home...over a year ago. (51)

Gradually, he is distracted with the whole romantic affair with his wife, as he abandons his PhD program in America and relocates to Germany with Gina. She is going for her fellowship program, but persuades him to go with her, to help her settle in Berlin, she convinces him saying "you must come, darling...I can't do it without you" (10). However, after settling in Germany, Gina's attention is solely on her work without considering he husband's state. According to him, "Gina was sleeping all day after working through the night – she wouldn't wake up till late afternoon when she'd emerge looking drawn and ethereal only to grab a sandwich from the fridge and go back to work – and I was left alone... (15). The negligence and lack of attention from his wife exposes him to unhealthy associations and life style in Berlin which Gina could not tolerate but to separate from him.

Another character in the text is the late David, a Zambian who left his home country fifteen years ago when Portia (the younger sister) was nine, while himself was seventeen. He was in love triangle with two Caucasian women, Katharina and Brigitte. According Katharina, while discussing with Portia about her brother's death, David, she described him as an emotionally available man, whose care she could not reciprocate but to 'kill' him. In her word to Portia, "your brother, he was easy to talk to, yes? Very charming" (107). First, David's marriage to Brigitte is out of pity, as a lonely, older, devoiced lady who needs love and company, David becomes her source of comfort. Still, she could not control her domineering attitude towards him in less than two years of their marriage, as she considers herself superior to David. As result of the unbearable Brigitte's domineering attitude, David, whose name is now Moussa moved in with Katharine.

Katharine, the second Caucasian lady he got entangled with, claims she truly loved David, as she explains that "it was love at first sight. For both of us" (110) and Portia asks "well, if you were so in love, why did you kill him? Why did you kill my brother?" (110). Apparently, when she was done and tired of seeing her mentally drained husband around her unannounced, she decides to terminate him, instead of calming him as expected of a partner. According to her ... at that moment the train lights flashed into my eyes and it was as if I was released from chains. I ... pushed him with all my might. ... I kept seeing his body, cut into pieces" (156). That is the end of David who has spent fifteen years of his life in Europe.

Also, James Kariku, Portia and late David's father, suffers the same fate of living all their lives in Europe only to return and die in Zambia. In the novel, David's father is a renowned poet and writer, who left his native country due to political upheavals. As a fearless columnist, poet, and academic, "in Europe he was a hero, telling truth to power. They called him the conscience of Africa" (135). He abandoned his wife and children for eighteen years as he begins a romantic affair with his translator, May, who translates his writings into Greek. Portia recalls the day she visits him in his hotel, during her MA at SOAS, when her father came to SOAS as a special guest for a program. According to her:

...but I recognized him.... Then he saw me. "Portia. You look exactly like your mother". He gave me a hug. He introduced me to his friend, "my daughter." He looked happy to see me. But it was awkward. I didn't know how to be a daughter, and clearly, he had forgotten how to be a father. Plus, I didn't know what to call him, Dad, or Father, or Baba" (140)

This is how degenerated the relationships of many African migrants and their families back in Africa can be. For poor Portia, she laments - "but all I wanted was to talk to my father, alone, for just a few minutes" (141). Unfortunately, May, her father translator and lover will not grant her the opportunity, instead "she was the only one who tried to make a conversation with me" (141). Clearly, African migrants actually gets worse when there is a 'foreign' woman in their life, like the aforementioned cases, they are totally separated from their culture, language, people and tradition, while forcefully intertwining with these foreign women, whose ulterior motives is to use them for their personal development. Usually, at their old age, or when they can no longer satisfy these wives, they are abandoned or frustrated to death.

Evidently, the role of these women in African migrant discourse, as seen in the novel, can be deceitful and treacherous. Yet many are still victims every day, as they are lured and cajoled in to these romantic affairs. Portia asks, "what is it about black men that acts like a super-magnet to these white women: curiosity.... What is it about white women that black men can't keep away from?" (110). It is a disturbing question that every black family needs to be to understand. Because, despite the issue of racism and class discrimination between the blacks and whites, why are black men still irresistible to white women? Is the attraction genuine or compromised, because these women are not interest in Africa, they relegate and detest the continent, in the case of Portia and her 'loss', she asserts that "they didn't care. They didn't even know where Zambia was on the map of Africa. As far as they were concerned all of Africa was one huge Gulag archipelago, and every African poet or writer living outside Africa has to be in exile from dictatorship" (140).

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, the discourse on subjugation and traumas to the role of white women, this paper, through the novel, addresses some important areas in African migrant literature. Habila's text interrogates some sensitive aspects of immigrant lives in the diaspora. First, he explores the incomprehensible rush or interest of immigrants towards the western world, despite the clear subjugation, of subjecting African professionals to engaging in lower and humiliating jobs, for them to survive the harsh reality of things. Secondly, he questions migrants' attitudes of taking high risk, of crossing the deserts and Mediterranean Sea over uncertainties in Europe. Stressing that migrants living conditions and standard in Europe, never worth the risk. So, he advises that this means of transition should be stopped with urgent effect. Lastly, he highlights the actual state of the lovey-dovey relationships between the black men and white women, that it is all for some selfish reasons, which usually benefits the women, while leaving the men stranded and frustrated at their old age or death. With these grey areas of immigrants' experiences, as raised in the text, it is expected of prospective 'victims' to be circumspect about their decision of relocating to Europe, as it is usually not as perfect as it seems.

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