

Journal Of Arts and Communication (JAC); Vol. 2,

A Walk to Europe: A New Historicist Discourse on Irregular Migrant Experiences in E.C. Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready: The Stars Will Appear*
Abigail Onowosemenmen Oaikhena, PhD, Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Email: oo.abigail@unizik.edu.ng
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7760-4695>

Abstract

The physical and psychological trauma associated with illegal migration can best be imagined rather experienced. Illegal/irregular migration is witnessing an alarming surge that has engulfed Africa as a continent. Many have died in the desert while a lot more are tortured and sold into slavery in Libya. Some who are able to escape, are faced with crossing the Mediterranean Sea in fragile open balloon boats. The different media outlets daily report on those that have drowned in the process, yet the few who make it to Europe, the promised haven, are disillusioned as a result of the unreceptive environment. Thus, E.C. Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready: The Stars Will Appear*, is a lucid capturing of this grey area of irregular migrant experiences. He investigates the activities involved, while interrogating the causes so as to explore possible solutions to this bedeviling menace brewing in Africa and other third world countries. As a work on historical facts and antecedents, New Historicist literary theory is adopted to aid the analysis of this benumbing discourse in the novel.

Introduction

Migrant issues and irregular migrations are prevalent discourses in African literature, as writers tend to explore the cause of this overwhelming attitude of young Africans, who are more concerned about their imagined exploits in Europe instead of examining the risks and its implications. It is a clarion call on African writers as they seek to reflect on the dangers which irregular migration poses to the general society. Hence at the end, many of these immigrants are usually faced with all manner of disappointments, depression and trauma as their high hopes diminish in the face of reality.

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. Majority of them usually end up in the jails and mental homes as a result of the psychological torture and trauma in the unfriendly environment.

Thus, the prolific African writer, E.C. Osondu, explores this social menace affecting Africans, mainly from the angle of illegal migration, starting from the desert experiences to the open balloon boat crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. He investigates the risks involved and the

supposed results which is another form of disappointment that awaits prospective irregular immigrants. His motive is to didactically show that appearance may not after all be reality.

However, New Historicism literary theory is concerned with social discourse, as it investigates any given literary work alongside with its history and seeks to interrogate the text under study alongside with the history upon which it is produced. Against Roland Bathes view of death of the author, Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism recognizes the role and presence of the author in any literary work because it is believed that a writer, writes from the happenings in his society.

Hence, New Historicists seeks to understand literature from a historical perspective. As a theory developing from a response to old Historicism, which views the text "as an autonomous entity" (Ryan, 128), New Historicism "reposition[s] the text in the original discursive reality of the age in which it was produced" (Mukesh Williams, 118). Headed by Greenblatt, the New Historicists see history as not just a documentary of events that happened in the past, but rather a complex narrative of human reality which is viewed as an ideology by the society in question.

While a literary work may or may not tell about the factual aspects of the world from which they emerge, they are mainly concerned with the prevailing ways of thinking at that particular time. It is in this line that a literary work "should be considered a product of its time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than an isolated creation of a genius" (Sharma, 5). The political and cultural angle that the theory provides in the interpretation of any literary work encourages literary studies to re-establish a link with the political and social world that gave rise to it. Again, Ann Dobie added that;

A New Historicist's analysis can pursue several different (but not unconnected) lines of inquiry. It can ask questions about the author's life and times, the life and times in which a work is set, the various discourse represented in the work, the author's intentions.... (Dobie, 2002: 184).

Worthy of note is that one of the major aspects of New Historicism in literary analysis, is to identify the presence of the author within the context and content of the text under study. It is expected to look out for:

The world of the author, personal, and public; the historical-cultural environment of the text, both the one it depicts and the one in which it was produced; and the internal world of the text itself, the discourses that generate the narrative. In the case of all the three, you should be attentive to the power structure that is in place, questioning inequalities and pointing out social forces that build community and those that destroy it. (Ann Dobie, 2002: 192)

However, the author, E.C. Osondu was born and raised in Nigeria, West Africa and his encounters and interactions with some of these migrants helped him to give a clear account of the dangers associated with illegal migration of Africans to Europe. He used the first person narrative technique which was done through a childlike innocence. The innocence in the

narrative compels the reader to see the story about illegal migration of Africans as a thing of high ignorance. All the major activities which include the actions and inactions of other characters in Osondu's novel get unfolded through the major character; hence, the use of the first person pronoun is predominant.

The fact-fiction (faction) novel is a transverse of illegal migrations of Africans through the desert and Mediterranean Sea to Europe. It is no news that many Africans in the search for greener pastures often go through the desert where they encounter lots of inhuman and horrible experiences, where many have been kidnapped, raped, sold into slavery, robbed, even meet their untimely and disgraceful deaths. Of course, many have lost their lives in this journey, buried in shallow graves or eaten up by wild animal as they journey to Europe, walking across the desert to Libya, where they usually get smuggled into Europe, using the Open Balloon Boat to cross the Mediterranean Sea, at the detriment of the illegal migrants. According to *The Guardian*, on the 17th day of June, 2015, the government of Niger reported that: "a total of 33 migrants have died in the Sahara Desert in Niger in transit to Europe this year, including 18 found dehydrated last week near a road to the border with Algeria (online)"

In the novel, the unnamed narrator who is also the protagonist, heard about Rome for the first from a man he calls Bro. He calls him Bros because "in Gulu Station you are not allowed to call any person older than you by their first name (1)". However, prior to Bros' return, he was thinking that Rome is in heaven like other place mentioned in holy books.

Osondu captures the protagonist's upbringing and environment as a major influence or trigger that spurs him into embarking on such a dreadful and deadly journey. Our protagonist is like

many Africans, especially the youths, who are left with no hope for a better future in their home countries, as it seems nothing to live for, since the future looks dim and bleak. So, they are ready to risk their lives in order to get to a place of succor and survival. This, invariably demonstrates the failed leadership system in Africa, as the government does not about her citizens hence no proper attention or provision is given to them. Many are unemployed, uneducated, living in the slums with little or no social amenities and infrastructures to ease their hardships and pains. The narrator laments that despite the high level of development and stories on modernity in other places, “the normal well in Gulu Station got its water from rainfall (29)”.

The early part of this 2021 novel, is set in Gulu Station, a small hamlet with little or no development. According to the narrator; “Gulu Station only has one of everything... we accept the lives we have and live life as we know it (8-9)”. It can be said that the villagers have no idea about the high rate of developments going on in the outside world other than their community, not exposed to any form of development or social life till Bros’ visit from Rome. For the very first time, they feel the presence of one of their own who has gone to those beautiful places they never imagined, an illustrious son of the community, who walked through the desert to Rome and now returns back to his community with lots of riches.

This awareness which he creates through his display of wealth and affluence in this local community, informs the narrator’s decision and sense of longing for a better life he never knew was in existence. He now yearns for riches and development as he recounts:

I wanted to make Nene and Gulu Station proud too. I wanted people to eat and drink in Nene’s house as they were doing in Bros’ house. I want to

install a giant television in Nene's sitting room which the people of Gulu Station would come to watch. I wanted to go to Rome, but I had no idea how (3)

So, Bros' frivolous lifestyle in the community is seen as a constant reminder of the protagonist's desire to also go to Rome, feel the place of abundance and return to his community as a wealthy young man too. Here, Rome is used as a metaphor for Europe. Like many young Africans who often get attracted and lured into the desert journey to Europe when their peers, friends, family members or neighbors of about the percentage of two out of seven return home with success stories in Europe. Bros is fortunate enough to be alive despite the horrendous journey he made to Rome which he never discloses to anyone, not even to his close village ally, the narrator.

In all of these, Nene is constantly in the picture. The writer portrays Nene as the only voice of reason which guides the narrator, she earlier warned him to "avoid bright and shiny things (31)", as she tells a story of how sickness entered the world through human greed. Here, in her figurative story, Nene is not referring to tangible shiny objects alone but envy of the rich by the poor who are only concerned about the beautiful, flamboyant picture they could see without weighing the sacrifices involved. Because it has been reported that these illegal migrants, despite their show of wealth and comfort, lots of them have had hellish experiences in their journey to Europe. According to *The Migrant Project*; "smugglers [can] hide migrants in trucks and in the boots of cars. Sometimes migrants get trapped and die there. Often migrants have to cross difficult terrain on foot, including mountains, forests and rivers, for many days with no shelter and during winter, in very cold and harsh weather (online)"

Thus, Bros, in his magnanimous heart towards the narrator, offers him a leeway to Europe by giving him a map drawing on how he can illegally find his way to Rome. He tells him;

This is the map I used when I was going to Rome. You see, I do not need it anymore. I will fly back with the same airline the Pope uses when he travels. Come to Rome using this map, when you return to Gulu Station you can fly like me. If you follow the routes on this map you will get to Rome. They say, that- *All Road Leads to Rome* (20).

So, the narrator embarks on the desert journey to Rome. In this journey one discovers that there are many youths like himself who are also willing to go against all odds in order to get the better envisaged life in Europe. Unfortunately, the desert is not as friendly as they expected and reports from it show that it is more of a death trap than being the way which leads to success. The narrator submits that:

Many compared the desert to the sea, but made of sand. Deep and mysterious, it was both a way, a road, a passage that sometimes led to death. Many are its terrors and secrets. Its belly was cavernous and huge, always hungry, never full (49)

Despite the warnings and fearful reports from the desert, African youths find it more convenient travelling through it than staying back in their home countries, where lacks and hunger reign.

The impoverished men and women in Africa and Middle East are quite optimistic and more

engrossed in their imagined successes in Europe, with their illegal and ill-advised desert movements with all the horrors and terrors they will pass through in the desert. In another parlance, Osondu reminds illegal desert migrants that;

The desert is like the god of mischief; it always taunts the unwary. Here looks, an oasis to sooth your parched throat. Just crawl closer, yes crawl closer and you can sit under the shed, drink and slake your thirst. The unwary draws nearer and nearer and the only thing near is death (49).

Unfortunately, these reports are usually perceived and described as speculations and untrue stories by many desperate Africans. They view them as reports from people who are not willing to help others to succeed like them in Europe, just like the protagonist. However, in order to verify these claims about the desert to the desperate protagonist and his likes, the writer presents an ironical character, Qaudir - one of the desert crossers who is a constant eye witness of the horrors associated with this journey, yet, he is willing and will drive them through the same dangerous desert. According to him;

On one of my trips ... we were in the middle of the journey when I heard gunshots. Armed bandits were pursuing us in a Land Rover. These were pirates of the desert...I knew what they wanted. They would strip travelers, search them and collect everything they had. If they desire any of the women, they would take them as slaves.... These are evil men, as merciless as the harsh desert sun. They have been known to kill entire group of travelers who had nothing to give them (80-1).

The paradox here is Qaudir's character, who still continues with such line of risky business as he is more concerned with the profits than his life because there is no other alternative source of income for him, his two wives and children. Like the desperate migrants, Qaudir has plans of how he would spend any profit made from his trips to the desert without taking into consideration his safety or otherwise in the course of the journey because he is a faithful believer.

Another perspective to these their illegalities is the place of religion in their dealings. They all hold tenaciously to their faiths. It is a kind of view that God is in support of their activities, whether wrong or right. As for Qaudir, the journey across the desert can only be made on a Monday because it is "*Al'iithnin*" (83). While inside his vehicle there is "a prayer bead dangled from the rear view mirror. Another fat one dangled from the ceiling of the truck. Clapsed around Qaudir's robust fingers were yet another... (86), which he uses for protection.

As for the passengers, who survived the desert and are welcome to the jungle lifestyle in Libya, awaiting the sea to stay calm for them to get across to Europe, they are encouraged by their mean looking captain and boatman, to drop their money, as they will not be needing it in their new promised heaven- Europe. According them: "See, when you get over to the other side, you will become their child. Everything you need they will provide for you (137)". The same captain whose interest is on what he can get from his vulnerable victims, and not whether they perish in the sea or not, admonishes them as they enter the "Flimsy water-balloon" (135), thus; "don't throw your Holy Book into the sea. We all need prayers. Hold your rosary and your beads close. Don't lose them. We all need prayers. Never stop praying until you are rescued (130)"

Nevertheless, New Historicism shifted the focus on texts “from closed systems perpetuating fixed meanings to open systems creating significance” (Mukesh, 2003: 117). So, Osondu’s portrayal of how religious Africans can be in the face of illegalities, corruption, and injustice, further buttresses how they operate under the guise of being religious to carry out their corrupt activities in all facets of life within the continent, be it government or individual, public or private, official or unofficial and so on.

However, the journey on the sea is like a suicide mission as migrants are expected to be stranded while on the sea in order to attract rescuer ships. They stay in the fragile open balloon boat while their captain is in a strong boat and he explains that;

If you are in a strong boat, nobody will come to rescue you because you will not appear to be drowning. Do you understand that? If you are not drowning, then you need not to be rescued and you would be forced to return to where you started and the money you paid is gone. Your money is *vamos* (135-6)

The questions therefore would be, what if there are no rescuer ships? What if the open balloon boat gets punctured by any of the sea’s animals, like Whale or shark and gets deflated? What if the fragile boat gets capsizes? No wonder, November 2021, Simona Varrella published that; “Between January and August 2021, 641 migrants, presumably from Sub-Saharan Africa, died in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, 139 individuals who died in the Mediterranean Sea originated from North Africa (online)”.

As the novel progresses, the writer captures their brief experiences in the sea, they encounter sea waves in the open boat, and the narrator recounts that: “the sea spray on us, drenched us, and made us hide our heads between our legs like frightened, wet hens (138)”. Hence, the journey seems successful as their captain sights a rescue ship and ask his assistance to disembark from their open balloon boat, which really portrays them as drowning, lost and frustrated young Africans at the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately, for them, as against the warm reception they anticipated – “They said we would be suffocated by the kindness of the people we met (139)”, but in reality, they are met by

Men in uniform and stiff military hats. They had faces carved out of Carrera marble – immobile and severe. Their faces gave nothing away. What had they not seen? They had seen rotten corpses and bloated bodies floating on the water. They had watched an old man stop breathing at the point of rescue (139).

At the end, there is a change in the narrative with lots disillusionments, starting from the whispering welcome sounds from supposed old immigrants in Europe, telling them “your journey has not ended.... Do not stop here.... There is nothing for you here (140)”. With this, it is evident that things are not as rosy as they expected. It shows there could be little or nothing substantial for the old immigrants, as such, they are not ready to accommodate extra immigrants. At first the newly arrived immigrant, who are hoping for a welcome party are transfixed by the harsh system of things in the supposed envisaged heaven. Although, Rome, at first sight, looks beautiful, the narrator is disappointed with the cold reception and as he is unable

to reach Bros who promised him “any day you get to Rome, knock on my door and I will open for you (20)”. He calls Bros so many times and its rings but no answer, it is now he realizes that he is on his own and have to work like everyone else in order to succeed in Rome. So in Bros’ words, “*When in Rome, do as the Romans do* (145)”.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, Osondu, depicts the hopeless state of affairs in many African nations and its effects on vulnerable citizens who are directly affected by the poor leadership system as a result of bad governance in Africa. Their quest for survival forces them into the irrational decision of seeking for greener pastures by all means hence the perilous journey through the desert and the deep blue sea. The exchange rate between weak African currencies and the strong foreign ones continue to tempt poor Africans into embarking on these ill-advised journeys. Africa’s poor economy therefore encourages irregular migration to Europe, as it is seen as a quick way to get rich and live comfortably like Bros in the continent. New Historicist literary theory has therefore, helped us to elucidate and relate this work of fiction to real life happenings in Africa, with regards to the dangers of illegal and irregular migration of Africans to Europe.

In all, one can only hope that the lessons which Osondu teach in *When the Sky is Ready* will be a serious and effective deterrent to overly adventurous and foolish youths who fail to understand that Europe was built by its citizens hence they too can stay back and build Africa. Osondu has made a worthy contribution to the literary corpus on migration hence he deserves commendation.

Works Cited

- Dobie, Ann. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Wadsworth: Centage Learning. Third Edition. 2012
- Osondu, E.C. *When the Sky is Ready*. Ikeja: Ouida Books. 2021
- Ryan, Michael. *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc. 1999.
- Sharma, Rajani. 'New Historicism: An Intensive Analysis and Appraisal,' In *Indian Review of World Literature in English*, 10(2). 2014
- The Migrant Project <https://www.themigrantproject.org/migrants-nigerial/> retrieved July 1, 2022
- Varrella, Simona. 'Number of recorded deaths of migrants in Mediterranean Sea 2019-2021, by Origin.' from *statista.com*, 2021
- Williams, Mukesh 'New historicism and Literary Studies.' *Journal of General Studies*, No. 1, Vol. 27, February, 2003.