International Journal of Language and Literature
December 2024, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 24-32
ISSN: 2334-234X (Print), 2334-2358 (Online)

Published by The Brooklyn Research and Publishing Institute
DOI: 10.15640/ijll.v12n2a3
URL: https://doi.org/10.15640/ijll.v12n2a3

The Myth of a Migrant Utopia in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

Ekikereobong Aniekan USORO[1] and Kikanwa Enoabasi ONYEMA[2]

Abstract

The literary world teems with mythical narratives and their dissenting counterparts drawn from the wellspring of human experience, including narratives concerning man's primal yearning for greener pastures which has caused a peak influx of migrants into foreign territories in the 21st century. From among these narratives, this paper undertakes a study on the myth of a migrant utopia in Helon Habila's *Travellers*. With the theoretical provision of postcolonialism, specifically AtoQuayson's postcolonial tenet of 'postcolonializing', this paper highlights not only the harsh realities of a migrant journey but also how the events in the novel follow the lingering pathways of colonial history. Alongside other things, the analysis demonstrates that the marginalised and impoverished spaces occupied by migrants are not isolated incidents but a haunting recurrence of the spatial segregation traceable to colonial systems. Even beyond the primary settings of *Travellers*, Habila's characters reference other lands equally barren of the mythical migrant utopia, suggesting its nonexistence not only within the novel's confines but in the broader world as well.

Keywords: Migration, Myth, Postcolonialism, Postcolonializing, Quayson, Utopia

1.Introduction

The world's literatures orbit recurring themes and motifs, reverberating the lived experiences of their time and tethered as they are to the societies that birth them, though not always the specific milieu of their creators. Literary writings have been used as veritable conduits of beliefs and ideologies that involve the writing and rewriting of narratives propelled by various factors including disillusionment. Thus, what was considered true a decade ago can be rewritten in the present following the realisation of its flawed nature, a process observed in the ever-evolving narratives of literature. This is better expatiated in Kain's (1942) seminal article where he contends that 'For almost a century literary scholarship has cherished the Baconian scientific ideal that the progressive accumulation of fact will finally solve all problems of study…. But recently there have been widespread manifestations of disillusionment' (p.361). Kain's observation of disillusionment within literary scholarship, following a century of adhering to Francis Bacon's idealism, is an important context for assimilating the role of literature in belief reformation. In rewriting beliefs following disillusionment, literary works catalyse critical thinking and epistemological shift, confronting readers with diverse perspectives, challenging established norms, and expanding the boundaries of understanding while encouraging the art of revisiting reality.

More recently, about 65 years later, Kain's observation finds its resonance in contemporary scholarship, including Breyten Breytenbach's which extols the primary and simultaneous responsibilities of a writer to question beliefs and amplify the concerns of the people in society. In a more exponential and specific manner, Breytenbach (2007, p.166) asserts:

> A writer, any writer to my mind has at least two tasks, sometimes overlapping: he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society, but he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people. [In countries facing] acute social and economic inequities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people … [being] totally aware and self-questioning while contributing to the endless struggle for greater justice and more liberty.

[1]University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Oduduwa Road, Ibadan, Nigeria. Email: ekikereobongusoro@gmail.com, phone: 08083964949
[2]University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Oduduwa Road, Ibadan, Nigeria. Email: kikaonyema@gmail.com, phone: 080835148292

His assertion that writers serve as both questioners and agents of societal aspirations underscores the place of literature in reshaping beliefs and myths. What he refers to as myth here is not a story about 'the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs' (Leach and Fried, 1972, p.778) but widely held yet false beliefs or ideas. It is within this context that this paper situates the attempt by Helon Habila to question the myth of a migrant utopia in his *Travellers*. Using Breytenbach's model, the examination of prevailing attitudes and myths allows writers to function as cultural watchdogs, exposing factoids and remodelling them into facts.

Deep within the human spirit lies an instinctual pull toward greener pastures, and this primal urge, when woven into canonical and non-canonical literary texts, becomes freighted with myths begging to be exposed. The proliferation of migrants in the 21st century has witnessed a surge in the inclusion of such themes as migration, transnationalism, transculturalism, and displacement, among others, in African literature. This is due to the apparent unbearable degenerated socio-political status of most African countries, thereby compelling Africans to migrate in large numbers to the West — where they conceive as greener pastures. This is reminiscent of Ahmed's (2022, p.136) position that African literature is 'inextricably linked with the global concern for the large-scale displacement of African peoples from their homelands to the West and the Americas. Such concern for migration and the ensuing transnationalism is an inescapable responsibility for African writers of all shades: diasporic or home-based'. In this regard, it then becomes the responsibility of African writers to accommodate the motif of migration and its attendant issues in their creative texts, their place of residence notwithstanding.

Ahmed's emphasis on the responsibility of all African writers to address the innards of migration and the transnational identities that emerge from these experiences implies that the exploration of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the search for belonging is a fundamental task in African literary production. Maxwell (2014, p.251) notes that in Nigeria, migration occurs because the West, after colonialism, had 'assumed to be the commercial and cultural hub of the world. The migrants believe that the centre signifies realms of possibility, fantasy, and wish fulfillment where identities and fortunes might be transformed'. Migration is not done for its sake, and the various reasons that necessitate the movement of people from Africa to the West have been incorporated into fiction. For Maxwell, using Nigeria as a case study, the primary reason for migration to Western countries is the perception of the West as a global centre of economic opportunity and cultural influence. In his contribution to the discourse on global migration and its implications, Ojaide argues that globalisation marked by increased movement and interconnectedness across the world has affected African writers. This, he adds, is not just about migration but also the social, cultural, and psychological 'dislocation' that accompanies migration. These experiences, alongside exile, transnationality, and multilocality, all 'have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content, and form of the literary production of Africans abroad' (2008, p.43).

Ojaide's assertion crystallises the fact that it is almost inevitable for expatriate African writers to document their experiences by way of fictionalisation. Migrant literature is often laced with disillusionment where characters are confronted with the disparity between what was expected and what is experienced. This is because, as Maxwell notes, migrants do 'not know [that] the centre was also a place of banishment, unlawful practice, oppression, social disgrace and frustration' (p.251). Consequently, the shimmering mirage of a perfect life that draws migrant characters westward dissolves upon arrival, revealing a West not of utopian promise, but of its distinct struggles sometimes crueller for Black individuals in predominantly White settings. This is not to dispute the better economic and political standards of First and Second World countries, but as revealed in this paper, migrants do not live the perfect life typical of a utopia. Perhaps, the substantiation of the polemics regarding how mythical the idea of a migrant utopia is is hinged on what utopia represents in the first place. In her study of the concept of utopia both as a word and literary genre, Vieira (2010, p.3) notes:

> In order to create his neologism, More resorted to two Greek words – *ouk* (that means not and was reduced to u) and *topos* (place), to which he added the suffix *ia*, indicating a place. Etymologically, utopia is thus a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial.

Vieira's linguistic deconstruction of the term 'utopia' reveals its inherent antinomicnature, making a case that utopia is paradoxically a non-place, elusive, and unattainable. The etymons of 'utopia' constitute a chimera, a place that exists only in the realm of imagination, suggested by its linguistic and conceptual foundations that points to its impossibility as a concrete, realisable goal.

The complete disassembling of the word is done by Mill (1813, p.350) who assertively states that 'What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable'. Since utopia is itself not practicable, it is logical to posit that a migrant utopia is only a myth, within and beyond Habila's *Travellers*. It must be reiterated that this does not deny the high standard of living, regard for the rule of law, and many other indices of developed nations but it rejects the belief held by potential migrants that there is a perfect migrant destination. The presence of alienation and rootlessness in migrant destinations have partly fostered transnationalism, what Kastoryano

(2000, p.307) describes as 'a global phenomenon principally concerning postcolonial immigrants'. For Ngongkum (2014, p.80), it is a 'condition in which despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders, certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common, however virtual-arena of activity'. Put another way, migrants use transnationalism to remain 'under the influence of their home country as well as the new settings in their host country' (Kim, 2009, p.25). Nonetheless, this critique is not primarily concerned with the transnational traits of migrants in the West but with the representation of migrant destinations as places where 'travellers' are disillusioned from their expectation of a utopia using Habila's *Travellers*. Although various studies engage the thematic foci of Habila's novel using postcolonial theory, they mostly focus on the challenges posed by migrant destinations but pay little attention to how the events therein are intertwined with the legacy of colonialism, a research gap filled in this paper using Quayson's postcolonial tenet of 'postcolonializing'.

2. Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory, one of the broadest theoretical templates and hermeneutic fields in the criticosphere, features many prominent names including Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and other 'postcolonial' giants. The application of postcolonial theory to literary analysis is not a singular, monolithic endeavour operating from an insular island but a varied archipelago of approaches. The sheer breadth of perspectives within postcolonial thought, propagated by a diverse array of theorists and their multi-coloured interpretations, has resulted in a spectrum of options for engaging with texts across all genres. Said's (1978, p.3) approach to postcolonial theory follows his concept of the Oriental where he submits that 'European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self'. This way, Europe was positioned as rational, civilised, and progressive, while portraying the Orient as irrational, backward, and static. Within this critical approach, even Spivak's (2010) iconic titular inquiry, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', a cornerstone of postcolonial thought, has itself become a site of postcolonial critical debate, with Maggio (2007, p.421) proposing, perhaps, a more pressing titular question: 'Can the Subaltern be Heard?'

The multiplicity of approaches testifies not only to the complexity of postcolonial theory itself, but also to its adaptability in projecting the many-sided ways in which literature reflects, resists, and reshapes the legacies of colonialism. So vast is postcolonialism that Quayson (2000, p.10) notes that 'Brazil can be said to be postcolonial but in a very different way from that of Nigeria; and Japan has postcolonial elements which are quite different from any perceivable postcolonial realities in Britain or France'. Mirroring the dynamism of postcolonialism, Gandhi (2019, p.ix) posits that 'Early postcolonialism exposed the limits of academic Eurocentrism, but it did so as an adjunct to mainstream critical theory. It had a distinct humanistic idiom and methodology — more value based than positivist, though always with materialist deference to real events, people, places, pasts, and so on'. Through Gandhi's focus lens, early postcolonial thought emerged to contest the dominance of European perspectives within academic disciplines but it ended up functioning as a subordinate element within those existing structures. Robinson (1997, p.14) expounds postcolonial theory as 'The study of all cultures/societies/countries/nations in terms of their power relations with other cultures/etc.; how conqueror cultures have bent conquered cultures to their will; how conquered cultures have responded to, accommodated, resisted or overcome that coercion'. Within this structure, postcolonial theory examines how subjugated cultures have responded to colonial dominance. It is, therefore, a study of both the imposition of power and the responses to it.

Within the postcolonial project, creative writers and critics are active participants, positioned on either side of the struggle for marginalised voices with neutrality not being an option. It is for this reason that 'Spivak wants to expose the complicit nature of literature and the intellectual elite, which often appears innocent in the political realm of oppression' (Maggio, 2007, p.420). In this regard, Habila could have used *Travellers*, while seemingly removed from direct political action, to perpetuate and reinforce colonial ideologies through subtle narratives, characterisations, and linguistic choices. He, nonetheless, engages in postcolonial discourse by taking on the task of uncovering (c)overt mechanisms of power. This paper adopts Quayson's 'process of postcolonializing' as the tenet of postcolonial tenet used in this paper which is highlighted below:

> …there is an inextricable relationship of epistemological dependency between the West and its formerly colonized Others that makes itself felt at the most subtle points in the West's perception of itself. Postcolonialism has to be seen as a viable way not just of interpreting events and phenomena that pertain directly to the 'postcolonial' parts of the world, but, more extensively, as a means by which to understand a world thoroughly shaped at various interconnecting levels…. The process of postcolonializing, then, would mean the critical process by which to relate modern-day phenomena to their explicit, implicit or even potential relations to this fraught heritage.

Quayson emphasis on the relationship between the West and its former colonies stresses a connection so substantial that it subtly influences how the West understands itself in different contexts. Postcolonialism, accordingly, is not wholly a way to interpret events in formerly colonised regions but the assessment of contemporary events through the prism of the historical experience of colonialism, which this essay does using Habila's *Travellers*.

3. The Illusion of a Migrant Paradise in Habila's *Travellers*

A titular explication of Habila's novel, 'Travellers', by a reader who has no prior information of the text drives them into the expectation of the movement of people or animals (if it is a fable) from one place to another, whether physically or spiritually. Expectedly, a cursory look into the pages reveals the shifting settings in the novel, signalling migration. The novel is loaded with migrant's temperament, or what Olaniyan (2020) calls migritudinal temperament. This can be linked to Omotoso's (1979, p.20) submission that 'Because the idealogy [sic] of Humanism is not tied to specific socioeconomic formulations, man is left in a helpless state for ever [sic] groping, travelling in a stand-still vehicle bound for his ideal life'. This sums up the perpetual state of flux and the urge for migration that characterises many African experiences, making the pursuit of a better life an innate human aspiration often leading individuals to embark on journeys across borders. The narrator's movement to Berlin is a defining moment in the novel that informs the migrant's proclivity for movement. He initially rejected the idea of moving to Berlin which, according to him, 'was only my immigrant's temperament, hoping for home and permanence in this new world, at the same time fearful of long-term entanglements and always hatching an exit plan' (p.11). The migrant heart is torn between two homes: the one they seek to build and the one they cannot fully leave behind.

The strain between the desire for stability and the fear of entrapment leads to uncertainty. The protagonist is weary of staying in the new Berlin world as he breeds the hope of returning home to Nigeria. His longing for home is built around his firm belief that 'every departure is a death, every return a rebirth' (p.12), foreshadowing a predicted cycle of loss and renewal, mourning and celebration that characterises the aftermath of migration. Applying Quayson's concept of 'postcolonializing' elucidates historically rooted explication of the protagonist's eventual desire for return. The departure from where he is not alienated to the centre of alienation is captured in the 'death' of a pre-colonial way of life mirrored in his departure. He leaves behind not just a physical location but a familiar social and cultural locale, a part of his identity. The promised land of the former coloniser often transforms into a world of conflicting realities because while it is a hub of economic opportunities and/or political refuge, it also perpetuates a sense of Otherness as migrants are constantly reminded of their difference, their 'not-belonging', and Orientality (following Said's [1978] theory of the Orient); reliving the colonial experience of being subjected to a foreign culture and power structure.

This residual knowledge of racial stratification which operated during and after colonialism triggers the desire for return, a 'rebirth'. The protagonist's homeland, irrespective of its problems, represents a connection to a pre-colonial past where their cultural identity was not defined in opposition to a dominant Western culture. The return is a symbolic reclaiming of that lost identity, a re-establishment of connection to a heritage disrupted by colonial history and further fractured by the act of migration itself. It is an attempt to heal the wounds of displacement and to reconstruct a sense of belonging in a space that, despite the changes wrought by colonialism, still holds the promise of cultural continuity and self-affirmation. The return, therefore, is understood as a form of postcolonial resistance, a rejection of the permanent displacement imposed by the historical forces of colonialism and migration. The protagonist is almost losing his grip on life as he shares his genuine sentiments: 'I was sliding down a precipice, but I was unable to stop [....] Maybe this was what we needed. A break from our breaking-apart life' (13). This makes concrete the fact that migrants do not have their lives all pieced together as many assume/envision. His relationship was crumbling in addition to his already complicated life even as a migrant in a supposedly greener pasture.

The disorganised lives of migrants are shown even from the beginning of the narrative when Mark, one of the characters in the novel, lived with his three friends — Stan, Eric, and Uta — in an abandoned church building, all of whom are migrants from different African countries. It is described as one of those 'crumbling buildings you occasionally saw around Berlin, spared by the war […]' (p.14). Quayson's adopted tenet in this critique helps in mapping out how their residential locations can be linked to the colonial past. According to Lephakga (2015, pp.146-147), during colonisation, 'Africans were forced to go through a violent process which alienated them from their ancestral land', and this made them 'pariahs in the land of their birth' (p.149). As in South Africa, the Land Act of 1913 pushed natives to the fringes while allowing the foreigners to occupy the vast remains after the allotment, setting aside '7-8 per cent with the promise of more to come' (Beinart and Delius, 2014, p.669) for native South Africans. Given this context, the question, although rhetorical, is: if the colonisers possessed the best and largest part of native land, how can it be surprising that Blacks who were pariahs in their homelands possess the worst parts of the land of the colonisers?

Colonialism allowed European powers to seize the best lands and resources in their colonies, displacing and marginalising indigenous populations, and the question above becomes tragically relevant. The abandoned church, a relic of European history (spared by the war), becomes a dwelling space for these migrants, representing a marginal space in Germany. This marginalisation is a replay of the historical displacement and dispossession experienced by colonised populations, for just as colonisers occupied the prime real estate in colonised territories, leaving the less desirable areas for the native populations, these migrants find themselves relegated to the neglected corners of a European city. The historical architecture and the neglect it has suffered over time, resulting in its tilted state, represents the migrants' lives teetering on the edge of collapse, and the juxtaposition of the old church and the new buildings is more than just an architectural detail; it symbolises the migrants' demoted position within German society. Despite crossing borders and oceans, the migrants carry the weight of their former lives, a shadow that trails them to their new homes.

The narrator's belief that 'every departure is a death, every return a rebirth' (p.12) is substantiated in the return of African leaders who were once sent into exile but later returned to their countries years after the departure of the erstwhile colonialists. The narrator says:

> I looked at the unsmiling faces, thinking how ironic history was, that they'd come for succor here, escaping persecution and apartheid, this place that a few decades earlier had been roiling with its own brand of persecution under the Nazis. How did they cope with the food, the new language, with being visibly different, with the bone-chilling winter of exile? Most of them had returned to South Africa, those who had survived exile's bitterness, and were now their country's new leaders, replacing their white oppressors, most of whom had in turn been relegated to exile in the dark and dusty chapters of history (p.13).

The narrator emphasises the irony of South Africans seeking refuge in Germany, a country that had itself been a perpetrator of persecution. The return to one's homeland can also be a bittersweet experience as the physical and emotional scars of exile may continue to haunt individuals long after their return. The challenges of reintegrating into society, rebuilding relationships, and adapting to a changing world can be overwhelming. Either way, remaining in the migrant destination or returning is not problem-free; there is no utopia anywhere. As a survival mechanism, migrants often resort to paper/interracial marriages, exemplary instances being the Nigerian narrator who is married to Gina, an American. The parents of Julius Maier, Mark's lawyer, are not of the same race: while his father is Burkinabe, his mother is German.

Inter-racial marriage attenuates the effect of alienation on the migrants who are usually treated as inferior. With a white spouse, a Black migrant gains relevance more than a Black migrant with a Black spouse. Instances of mixed marriage massively contribute to the multicultural outlook around the migrants as some of the cultural practices in these nations appear odd to the migrants. As such, to keep going amid culture shock, they learn to get themselves accustomed to the reality around them. Hawkinson (2008, p.60) maintains that:

> The modern era of globalization is characterized by unprecedented movement and migration — of capital, cultures, ideas, and people – both across and within borders. The movement of people can be a positive development, particularly where multiculturalism nurtures tolerance, cultural exchange, and innovation. In contrast, individuals who embody multiple cultural codes can come into conflict with the traditional state conceptions of minority rights, citizenship, and cultural identity.

Driven by the promise of economic opportunity, the pursuit of political stability, and the yearning for personal fulfilment, many traverse borders in the age of globalisation, contributing to the rise of diverse and multicultural societies. In these societies, migrants often find themselves relegated to low-skilled, low-paying jobs, despite their qualifications and experience. This explains the narrator's statement: 'I had met others like them here in Berlin, at readings, on the train, young men and women, in thread-bare sweaters and tattered jeans, mostly living in communes in abandoned buildings […]' (p.20). Occupying abandoned buildings depicts the subpar living conditions of these migrants as they are forced to inhabit spaces that have been ghosted by the White populace. Even from their dresses, one senses that the standard of their lives is below average.

With verisimilitude, the reader cannot help feeling pity for the migrants when confronted with the descriptions of the abandoned buildings they occupy. In another scenario, the narrator meets Portia whom he tries to make comfortable, and says: 'I'd invite you for a nightcap, but my place is a mess. The dust alone will give you an infection' (p.92). The narrator's description of his abode here emphasises the squalid nature of the place and the narrator's inability to host a guest, even for a simple drink. Besides, most of the migrants live 'an improvised and makeshift life' (p.22). The point of convergence between African and Western settings is that migrant destinations also breed imbalances that culminate into protests. In one such situation, the narrator says that 'A tear-gas canister landed next to me and I saw a wild-haired youth snatch it up and throw it back at the

police, its arc of smoke hanging in the air like a dying thunderhead' (p.26). Using the trails left of thunderheads in his description of this scene carries a violent undertone. This is not surprising because Habila's use of this simile is to describe a scene characterised by protests by youths and resistance by the police. Police brutality is also witnessed in migrant destinations, only that it is mostly against people of colour, informing Mark's derogatory description of the police: 'Motherfucking pigs. It's the police, they've been targeting us for a while' (p.28). The dirty and stinking stereotype attributed to pigs is used to describe the police after raiding the abandoned church building where he and his friends live.

However, the point of divergence is that the nakedness intensely frowned upon in Africa is not common in the German world of Habila's *Travellers*. Upon getting to Berlin, Manu's daughter, Rachida, experiences culture shock due to her exposure to a practice that is alien to her. She sees a billboard with a completely naked man seated on a stool, 'leering into the camera, his crotch barely covered by his hands clasped over it. A few months ago, Manu would have stepped in front of his daughter to block her view, but now he simply turns his gaze away. It is a new world, another culture. She'll get inured to it' (p.57). The above obscene pictorial representation is weird to Rachida who understands, based on her cultural background, that posing nakedly is 'immoral'. But to cope with the cultural and moral values of the new place she finds herself, she will have to get used to the state of things in Berlin. Her father's initial reaction of shock and protectiveness gradually shifts to acceptance, suggesting a process of acculturation whereby individuals adapt to the norms and values of a new culture. This process of adaptation may involve a period of discomfort and cannot be isolated from the fact that there are no migrant utopias since what is an aesthetic necessity to natives may be problematic to migrants.

Another story centres on the experiences of female migrants including those of a helpless woman and her baby on an Italian seashore, survivors of a shipwreck separated from her husband and daughter. Due to memory loss, she is tricked by someone who poses as a rescuer, taking advantage of her unfortunate situation: 'We were lovers, many years ago. I visited your country. We met. We fell in love' (p.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' (p.226). Consequently, she becomes the wife of a stranger, while her husband and daughter are still looking for her in Berlin. After regaining 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' (p.229). The boat is transformed into a floating tomb in the narrative, highlighting the high odds of not making it to migrant destinations. As a migrant, the woman takes with her a certificate that authenticates her marriage with the strange man because she would need some form of documentation on her way to her destination.

Historiographic metafiction, a postmodernist technique, is adopted by Habila in his narrative. This term, according to Butter (2010, p.626), 'engage[s] and unveil[s] the parallels between writing literature and historiography'. Works regarded as historiographic metafiction are also distinguished by frequent allusions to other artistic, historical, and literary texts to show the extent to which works of both literature and historiography are dependent on historical discourses (Bolland, 2002). In *Travellers*, Habila makes a historical allusion to the Sharpeville Massacre when South African police officers opened fire on a group of peaceful protesters against apartheid laws which undermined the identity of Blacks living in South Africa. Mark claims: 'This is our Sharpeville, our Agincourt'. This allusion shows the tragic cycle Blacks are trapped in as history seemed to have been repeating even after years of preaching equality. This pitiable loop privileges the Whites to the detriment of Blacks, within and beyond the African continent. Habila also refers to the Lampedusa migrant shipwreck of 2013:

> Matteo told him the doctor's story: he had left the village to go to Rome to study medicine, he had married there, making a good living, but he missed home, he missed the sea, and 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… (p.220).

This portrays the terrifying reality faced by many migrants, particularly those from Africa and the Middle East, who seek refuge in Europe. The doctor's story epitomises the tragic consequences of failed migration attempts where dreams of a better life are shattered while on transit to greener pastures.

The Mediterranean Sea has become a graveyard for many migrants who risk their lives in search of safety and opportunity. With the blend of the factual with the fictional, Habila lays bare the grim truth of migration — for many, the dream of a brighter future is extinguished before it can even be glimpsed. The paradox of migration is evinced by the narrator when he says: 'We're all in a tunnel, pulled forward by love, but love is actually death in disguise. To desire is to die. Yes, and not to love is also to die' (p.61). At first glance, this appears self-contradictory, yet closer scrutiny reveals its underlying truth. Migration presents a cruel paradox where the pursuit of a better life can end in death, as in the Lampedusa tragedy, but remaining rooted in a homeland festering with socio-political ills offers no guarantee of survival either. In both, the average African does not escape the

existential threat posed by their very existence in an attempt to continue existing. Stereotypes of criminality, job theft, and welfare dependency are tools of ostracisationin the novel, excluding certain individuals and groups from full societal participation and perpetuating discriminatory treatment.

Consequently, it is difficult for migrants to integrate into their host societies and build relationships with locals. Language barriers also contribute to social marginalisation because migrants who do not speak the dominant language struggle in foreign destinations. This is made concrete when the narrator says:

> Even if I spoke her language, the language the city spoke, would she understand me? A month ago I had gone to the post office to post a letter, and the lady… had stared at me, refusing to speak English, and we had stood glaring at each other as the line behind me grew and grew, she kept shouting German words at me, and I kept answering back in English, I wanted to buy stamps, I wanted to post my letter, till finally a lady from the back of the line stepped forward and interpreted…. A week later I started taking German classes (p.8).

The language barrier not only hinders communication but also reinforces a sense of otherness and exclusion. This forces the narrator to enrol in German language classes in order to integrate into the host society. Berlin, the supposedly 'most liberal and welcoming of all European cities' (p.29), is racist. Mark says: ' "Before you quote me, let me add… I have also noticed this, the women always hug their bags when I am in the vicinity, without fail. Like this.' He demonstrated. 'With both hands. I didn't notice it at first, but then it became so obvious I couldn't ignore it' (p.29). The racial stereotyping and prejudice faced by Black individuals, particularly in Western contexts, existed long before now. Following slavery, Blacks were biologically criminalised and scientific studies were carried out to substantiate the belief that they were inherently degenerative — 'Black bodies were therefore marked as criminal by biology' (Brown, 2018, p.31).

The women's behaviour when they spot a Black verifies Brown's claim that 'The "facts" of race, sex, and class continue to shape the ways black and gendered bodies are perceived and underlie the violent forms of control and punishment black people are still subjected to' (p.31). Blacks are perceived as potential threats associated with criminality or violence. This stereotype, rooted in historical and cultural biases, leads to discriminatory treatment since the Black man's mere presence is enough to trigger fear and suspicion. In the United States of America, however, racism is more intense than in Germany. The narrator highlights an instance of racial profiling that he experienced in New York:

> I had approached a policeman at Penn Station to ask for directions, which is the logical thing to do anywhere in the world, and as I got closer to him I noticed his hand inching toward the gun at his waist. I had stopped and looked behind me, thinking surely it was someone else he was reaching his gun for, not me. Now he was gripping his gun tightly, but still I asked him for directions, my voice wavering, and he looked at me, unsmiling, and said, 'Keep moving' (p.28).

A seemingly ordinary interaction can quickly morph into a dangerous situation due to racial bias. The narrator is targeted by a White police officer even in a non-threatening situation by immediately reaching for his gun.

Habila depicts the adaptive strategies people develop in response to racism through the narrator who says: 'When I told Gina that story a long time ago, she had been angered. She had called the police pigs and racists. She was fiery then, recently she had grown more tolerant, more oblivious of what was happening around her, her gaze focused only on her painting' (p.29). As events unfold, Gina adopts a more passive approach, focusing on her art and avoiding confrontation even though she is an American. This shift in perspective is a coping mechanism, a way to protect herself from the emotional toll of racism on the people she loves. Migration also severs ties as it does to the familial relationship between the narrator and his mother in the excerpt below:

> 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. The last time I called, over a year ago, my mother's voice had sounded so distant she could be talking about the weather to a stranger (p.35).

The narrator's decision to prioritise his new life in America has led to a gradual detachment from his family and cultural roots. The diminishing frequency of phone calls and the increasing distance in their conversations symbolise this growing emotional disconnect. His mother's voice was once a source of comfort and connection but has now transitioned into distant and impersonal sounds, showing that her son has not only physically distanced himself from his family but also emotionally.

Habila portrays the fact that a society that proves to be dysfunctional to migrants has effects on marriages and familial structures, as seen in the case of Karim, a Somalian migrant. Due to circumstances beyond his control, he leaves Somalia for Yemen, where he is registered as a refugee with United Nations assistance. To survive, he engages in illicit cigarette business and human smuggling, a risky business that claims the life of his boss who 'died in a boat on the sea' (p.175). Perouse (2003, p.46) discloses 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.

It is not surprising that Somalis in Habila's *Travellers* face challenges related to legal status, economic hardship, and social integration. These factors inform Karim's decision to join the business of smuggling because 'the money was good' (p.175). He is described in the novel as a humble and responsible father and husband who unfortunately has become a victim of socio-political instability.

Unexpectedly, Karim compromises his family principles even against his wife's wish in order to survive: 'Then my wife become unhappy, she say, "Why you do this? Are we not managing okay, what if you get arrested, what if you die, then what will happen to us? Now we are in this strange land, you can't break any law" ' (p.175). Karim's decision to engage in illegal activities, despite his wife's concerns, shows how much effect economic pressures have on migrants — since migrating to an envisioned utopia, his life takes a moral nosedive. The cyclical nature of suffering experienced by migrants, particularly those who are detained in prisons and refugee camps, is captured when the narrator says: 'I have seen many like him, the high spirits alternating with depressed silences. This is my third camp. The first was Lampedusa, then Greece, then this island. Every camp is different, and yet the same' (p.128). This revelation is prompted when he witnesses a young boy retrogress in physical and psychogenic health while in a refugee camp. The narrator's experience of multiple displacements underpins the instability and uncertainty that characterises the lives of many migrants across multiple countries. In all the stories, including the ones not examined in this paper, the different settings put forward one problem or the other to the migrants, the natives, or both.

4. Conclusion

Migration is rarely a journey undertaken for the sheer act of movement itself; it is not a whimsical pursuit of itinerancy but typically driven by a sense of necessity, a search for something perceived as lacking in one's place of origin. The use of the word 'perceived' is anchored on the fact that sometimes, what the migrant leaves their home country for in another country may not be lacking in their home country or cannot be found in the destination country. The diverse narratives woven together in Habila's *Travellers* illustrate this utility-based nature of migration. Each story exemplifies the fact that most people uproot themselves and embark on Herculean journeys not out of a simple desire for change, but because they are propelled by specific needs and motivations. Whether it is the pursuit of economic opportunity or the search for a haven from conflict, the migrant stories reveal a calculated decision, a weighing of risks and rewards. However, the imagined utopia that beckoned these migrants across vast distances rarely survives the crossing, leaving them to confront a world far removed from their initial expectations. Even beyond the primary settings of the novel, Habila's characters reference other lands equally barren of the mythical migrant utopia, suggesting its nonexistence not only within the novel's confines but in the broader world as well.

References

Ahmed, K. (2022). Transnational migration, identity, and the African literary experience. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 43*(1), 135-152.

Beinart, W. and Delius, P. (2014). The historical context and legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 40*(4), 667-688.

Bolland, J. (2002). *Michael Ondaatje's The English patient: a reader's guide*. Continuum.

Breytenbach, B. (2007). The writer and responsibility. In T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson (Eds.), *African literature: an anthology of criticism and theory* (pp.165-171). Blackwell Publishing.

Brown, J. (2018). Body. In E. Edwards, R., Ferguson, and J. Ogbar (Eds.), *Keywords for African American studies* (pp.29-32). New York University Press.

Butter, M. (2010). Historiographic metafiction. In B. Shaffer (Ed), *The encyclopedia of twentieth-century fiction*. Blackwell.

Gandhi, L. (2019). *Postcolonial theory: a critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Colombia University Press.

Habila, H. (2019). *Travellers*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Hawkinson, J. (2008). Searching for a place to call home: the challenges facing Europe's cosmopolitan citizens. *Macalester International, 20*(9), 59-77.

Kain, R. (1942). The reorientation of literary scholarship. *College English, 3*(4), 361-368.

Kastoryano, R. (2002). Settlement, transnational communities and citizenship. *International Social Science Journal, 52*(165), 307-312.

Kim, Y. (2009). Nation, migration and women: becoming a proper Korean by leaving Korea? *Asian Women25*(3), 63-90.

Leach, M. and Fried, J. (Eds). (1972). *Funk & Wagnalls standard dictionary of folklore, mythology and legend*. Funk & Wagnall.

Lephakga, T. (2015). The history of the conquering of the being of Africans through land dispossession, epistemicide and proselytization. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae, 41*(2), 145-163.

Maggio, J. (2007). 'Can the subaltern be heard?': Political theory, translation, representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political, 32*(4), 419-443.

Maxwell, U. (2014). Migration, disillusionment and diasporic experience in Segun Afolabi's *Goodbye Lucille and a life elsewhere*. *International Journal of English and Literature, 5*(9), 250-256.

Mill, J. (1813). State of Ireland. *Edinburgh Review, 21*, 340-364.

Ngongkum, E. (2014). Transnationalism, home and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The thing around your neck*. *Contemporary Journal of African Studies, 2*(1), 77-95.

Ojaide, T. (2008). Migration, globalization and recent African literature. *World Literature Today 82*(2), 43-36.

Olaniyan, S. (2020). Migritudinal temper in Helon Habila's *Travelers*. *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies, 20*, 68-83.

Omotoso, K. (1979). *The form of the African novel: a critical essay*. Fagbamigbe Publishers.

Perouse, M. (2003). A refugee diaspora: when the Somali go West. In K. Koser (Ed.), *New African diaspora* (pp.37-56). Routledge.

Quayson, A. (2000). *Postcolonialism: theory, practice or process?* Polity Press.

Robinson, D. (1997). *Translation and Empire postcolonial theories explained*. Routledge.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.

Spivak, G. (2010). Can the subaltern speak? In R. Morris (Ed.), *Can the subaltern speak?: reflections on the history of an idea* (pp.20-78). Colombia University Press.

Vieira, F. (2010). The concept of utopia. In G. Claeys (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature* (pp.3-27). Cambridge University Press.