

Roots, Routes, and African Diasporic Precarity in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

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Abstract- Discourses of Africa diaspora continue to experience incontrovertible fecundity. It is made the more pivotal by literature through relentless reflections of the expansion of global interconnectedness in textual narratives. An instance is seen in social realism and existentialist ideals leading the ideological landscape of diasporic thematic signposts interrogated in Helon Habila's Travellers (2019). Habila, like several other African authors, portrays the unique inclinations of many African migrants— legal or otherwise— who leave the homeland for numerous (un)justified reasons. Their traversals of precarious passages enroute diverse Euro-American spaces seeking the “American dream”, birth the migrant experiences that constitute diasporic narratives of the 21st Century. This paper charts and addresses first, the precarity of migrants' situations deconstructed under the rubrics of roots and routes. It equally harps on the excessive cultural baggage with which African migrants' identities are constructed in textual spaces; as well as how they maneuver their lived experiences. Ultimately, migrants' disillusionment is interrogated here using Post-colonial theory as an interrogative tool to show contemporary manifestations of deflated diasporic dreams. The research finds that the massive exodus of Africans to Euro-American spaces does not have the answers to Africa's socio-political and economic conundrum. The paper further interrogates the price of African diasporic uprooting, drawing from the primary text and co-texts. It finally determines that, in spite of the socio-economic advantages seemingly abounding in the West as a host land, African migrants could contend with the crisis of unplanned, and poorly charted diaspora capable of damaging them psychologically while rendering them unfulfilled, alienated, disillusionive, traumatized and possibly increased diasporic fatality.

Indexed Terms- African Diaspora, Helon Habila, Travellers, Spatial Poetics, Border Poetics, Disillusionment, Routes

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper amongst other preoccupations, examines the trajectories and transformations of contemporary African diaspora. African migrants have taken Theodore Adorno's assertion, “it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home” (*Travellers* xii) literally. Adorno's assertion substantiates Stephen Castle and Mark J. Miller's description of this era as “An age of migration” (3). If anything, the above positions justify the massive exodus of Africans to Euro-American spaces using diverse routes. Added to that is a palpable foregrounding of a shifting identity and reality of African and in particular, Nigerian diaspora. Harry Garuba in a perceptive irony described the Nigerian situation as, “What was once forcibly taken away was now willingly going to exile” (1). Contemporary fictive representations of Nigerian diaspora narrativize this semblance of verisimilitude that Garuba enunciates. In fact, Achille Mbembe stresses the signification of studying the Nigerian diaspora when he opines, “The history of the continent can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itineracy, mobility, and displacement” (Qtd in *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* 168). A collage of historiographical statistic drawn from the arts and the social sciences of African diaspora depicts massive movement of people from the periphery to the metropolitan centres of the world. Diverse narratives foregrounding the social realisms of the African homeland hold African leaders culpable. For whatever existential ideals projected for leaving the homeland, be it corruption, war, insecurity, poverty, and other infelicities, a radical change has been registered in recent diasporic ad/ventures.

In fleeing from the challenges of the homeland, in pursuit of happiness or a desired future, illegal migrants most especially, navigate precarious situations and paths in a bid to get to Europe. It is from this slice of reality of which African migrants tread diverse precarious routes in the quest to better themselves that Helon Habila's *Travellers* dramatizes and narrativizes. Mary Shey asserts that Habila's *Travellers* "Records some of the most throbbing experiences of migrants from the postcolonial countries who attempt to reach Europe illegally" (Shey 3).

To hone this indecent exodus into the obdurate psyche of the Nigerian diaspora, Habila draws heavily from the Lampedusa boat tragedy where 368 African migrants died at sea. In August 2023, 41 migrants heading towards Lampedusa *again* also encountered the same fate. African migrants continue to recreate these tragedies which are predominantly recurrent and are abound in a cyclical exercise in futility, ineptitude or obduracy. For the few lucky illegal migrants' who succeed in these precarious routes, they are faced with the host communities' unwelcoming attitudes. Pope Francis' comment on the Lampedusa tragedy, captures the essence of this discourse in simple words: "Migrants are not a danger— they are in danger" ("Pope Francis Visits..." *BBC* 2013). On the 10th Anniversary of the Lampedusa tragedy, in what the Vatican News referred to as "Silent Massacre", Pope Francis further articulated his sorrow for the "recurring grave tragedies in the Mediterranean," where countless innocent lives, particularly children, are lost as they search for a safer existence away from the horrors of war and violence" (1). The Pope also lamented the apathy of the Euro-American societies that seem to "have lost the ability to show compassion" (2).

2.1 Roots, Routes and Helon Habila's *Travellers*

In handling migrant routes, Habila interrogates two pertinent migrant routes— the sea and the desert. The sea/ocean according to Elizabeth M Deloughrey, "Perhaps more than any other space on earth, has been either ignored or read as a transparent, transitive, and asocial place by the vast majority of spatial theorists. The ocean space and the Atlantic in particular contributed to the rise of the novel and its narrative encoding of modern time" (*Routes and Roots*, 53).

Derek Walcott aptly notes, "The sea is history". Walcott's phrase has been frequently used as the epigraph to numerous Caribbean texts as he draws metaphors of routes as multifaceted. "The sea invokes both the fear of and desire for diaspora histories and practices". (Qtd in *Routes and Roots...* 60). Habila stresses the precarity of sea voyage as the capsized migrant ship oozes a dual metaphor— of death and also of rebirth. This dual representation is both literal and metaphorical. The ship is portrayed as a death trap because it crams its migrating passengers like tinned sardines. Signatures of rebirth in the disaster, render the voyage to a reading of a rebirthing experience. But this becomes immanent only if the ship can successfully convey the migrants to European shores where they are expected to start a new life.

The paradoxical inscription of dehumanization in Habila's novel is aptly rendered in the commoditized and spatially compressed "flesh" of the seafarers, so much so that even the desert warriors are not left out. Apparent in the narration of each individual's experience of both sea farers and desert warriors, the migrant body is portrayed as unmourn-able, depersonalized and a willing commodity in a diasporic motion. These bodies merge and synchronize in communicating the perilous routes of passage. In *Travellers*, apart from a few legal migrant characters who could afford the airfares, Habila's migrants like Manu for instance, flee Libya as a medical doctor with his family to find a new life in Europe. They unfortunately end up achieving nothing but despair and displacement. He narrates the rugged packaging of migrants which was causal to the boat capsizing: "Everywhere he turns there are bodies floating, people screaming" (97). The protagonist even when he flees from Europe using the sea route is haunted by the Mediterranean Sea even in his dream. He dramatizes the horror:

Bodies floating faceup, limbs thrashing, tiny hands reaching up to me. Hundreds of tiny hands, thousands of faces, until the surface of the water is filled with silent ghostly eyes like lamps shining at me and arms reaching up to be grasped; they float amidst a debris of personal belongings, toys, shoes, shirts, and family pictures all slowly sinking into a bottomless Mediterranean. I drift past, and they drift past, and God drifts past, paring His nails. I pull back, tears on my

face. I had not thought death had undone so many. I repeat the line over and over, rolling it over my tongue like a prayer, till my whisper turns into a scream. (234) Habila's Mediterranean Sea is protean which in its conscious imaging of loss, becomes symbolic of a horrible death pool. The sea draws similitic significance akin to the sirens of ancient legend drawing men, women and children to their death. Indeed, despite the high-profile reports of deaths of migrants who drown trying to reach Europe, unfortunately, a 2016 report by *Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative* juxtaposed the fatalities of the two routes and unequivocally stated "more people might die while crossing the Sahara Desert than while crossing the Mediterranean." (Qtd in "Chasing Greener pasture...3).

Habila's text has its narrative basis on the Lampedusa experience being the onus of his writerly project; and he sees no harm in weaving in the desert route through the eyes of the character, Juma to create some form of narrative balance in the general discourse of sea versus desert routes dichotomies. The novelist uses these parlous imagery to show that illegal routes exploit illegal migrants. Be it the sea or the desert charted by characters— fictional or real. The end product is always of precarious exploitation, trauma, disillusionment, despair and death.

Habila persistently reiterates that whatever routes— sea or desert— the fictive character chooses for its diasporic misadventure, the gory ordeal gets re-enacted over and over and each sequence gets worse than the former. Unless the character decides to end the diasporic process or die trying. Especially for the pigheaded deportees, who make repetitive returns through these precarious routes, the novelist warns and admonishes. Habila foregrounds that these illegal routes are strongly associated with death, displacements and despair. He opines that such rites of passage can only be extinguished through death as a permanent finality, a permanent citizenship in the host community, or maybe a physical return to the homeland as a finality too.

But the big question is why migrate in the first place? To answer this, Habila gives polyphonic reasons for African diasporic misadventures. For every diasporic character, fictive or real, there are myriads of reason

for leaving the homeland. For writers like Adichie, diasporic characters give reasons as mundane as "lethargic choicelessness". Unlike Adichie though, most of Habila's illegal characters have cogent reasons for their diasporic ventures that stem from war, insecurity, hunger, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, bloodletting, sexuality/gender issues, and survival.

2.2 Space, Identity, and Receptivity in the Host Land
Diasporic destinations, presumably are healthy sites of employment, livelihoods, desirable lifestyles, and survival, have come to occupy the frontiers of migratory routes and imaginations (*Ayona Datta*, 95). The novel, *Travellers* opens with the arrival of its anonymous narrator of Nigerian descent in Germany. In the early part of the novel, the reader is presented with white kids with blonde hair *hailing* the narrator and his wife, Gina, "Schokolade! Schokolade!" (4). A close reading of this hailing scene reminds one of Frantz Fanon's racial discourse in *Black Skin, White Masks* of a colonizer child's distressing cry to her mother, "Look, a Negro!". In fact, Fanon stresses that, "a normal Negro child, having grown up in a normal Negro family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact of the white world" (*Black Skin...25*). This racial profiling by kids opens the floodgates of identity and belongingness, stressing that the new space is conscious of colour. Louis Althusser in his fine contribution of explaining ideology as a "system of representations" governed by rules that serve political ends also declares how the act of *hailing* as a form of acknowledgement has the purpose of distinguishing between subjects. Althusser in his interpellation or *hailing*, accentuates hailing as an unconscious process that foregrounds assignment of different values in social spaces to different subjects. By this very fact, there is no inherent meaning in the individual but what is ascribed. Therefore Gina and the narrator are not merely human beings but are objects of individuation put under the microscope of colour and by extension, race differentials.

From this opening narration, Habila carefully prepares the reader for fuller expectations of racism by this suggestive hailing. The black couple are now positioned into fuller acknowledgement of their existence and surrounding as divergent when they are hailed or interpellated by the societal ideology they

have become part of. The idea behind this is to show racial duality of exclusion/inclusion, outsider/insider and white/black positioning. This racial inanity and unbelongingness is continuously expressed in the refrain “Even in Berlin I miss Berlin” (14). That is to say, even with human beings around there is lack of connection. By this binary, the illegal migrant is condemned to invisibility, this invisibility is literally depicted by Habila as a physical disappearance as seen in the supposed evaporation and voidability of Juma’s human existence, “[o]ne day the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor. The cleaner comes and sweeps up the twigs and bags them and throws them into the dumpster” (295). Just like one of Habila’s scholarly fathers, J M Coetzee in his *Life and Times of Michael K*, Juma and Michael K mirror the same alienating personae and like a twig, these characters’ identities are supplanted and their existence stilted and erased from the annals of history. Juma’s incarceration and finality tend to question several host communities’ handling of refugee situations and exiles. Habila tends to question the identity and receptivity of migrants as refugees and as exiles. Habila impresses it upon the reader that the diasporic tag, “exiles”, especially political exiles are treated better than refugees. He compares their living conditions and stresses that a migrant would fare better as a political exile than a refugee or an asylum seeker. It becomes a question of morality if there is a legitimacy or a sense of justification for the inhuman treatment of migrants both legal and illegal.

As the narrator and his wife Gina strive towards painting portraits of “real migrants” (4), the purpose of their journey to Germany, the couple have differing opinions of whom an ideal migrant is or should be. Where Gina fails to see beyond the physical scarification, the anonymous narrator, naively at first, collects the stories of these unseen physically and psychologically lacerated African migrants. His very first raconteur is Mark, a Malawian film student who has just been rejected by Gina for lacking the organic composition of a “true migrant”. On befriending Mark, the Nameless Narrator reveals the anguish and desolation Mark encounters. Mark is described as a complexity: “With Mark nothing was straightforward” (17), “He had lived a peripatetic life” (18) but “There was ease about him...” (18). In all, Mark is a collage of fragments beyond peripheral perception. Our

Nameless narrator bonds with Mark’s friends—Eric, Stan and Uta, a bunch of students who protest about the status quo and everything ranging from poverty, wars, hunger to diseases. He realizes that Mark is born a girl, Mary Chinomba. “He is a girl, or rather she is a girl” (55). S/he flees from his/her preacher father and when apprehended by the police, it is discovered that “his visa was expired” (31) and awaiting deportation. But Mark “Cannot go back to Malawi” (32). Not because there was a war or genocide but because s/he is a transgender who believes that returning to his/her father who is a pastor, and despises Mark/Mary as tainted and an evil incarnate is impossible. Here, Habila draws the reader’s attention to the present topical issue on sexuality and queer issues.

Some migrating Africans with similar or peculiar sexual preferences tend to travel abroad so as to be free to express their sexuality. One textual instance is seen in Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* (2005) and Akwaeke Emezi’s autobiographical fiction *Freshwater* (2018), where the protagonists flee Nigeria to Europe to access unhinged expression of their homosexuality. While abroad, these fleeing characters are disillusioned because even in some European countries, some sexual expressions and identities are neither entertained nor welcomed. Characters, real or fictional do not understand the great divide between the East and West bloc on sexual matters. Therefore, Habila unequivocally reiterates that sexual freelancing and moral decadence in the West should be carefully charted as characters flee to Europe.

Apart from the un-African sexual orientation that Habila uses the character of Mark to communicate, the author also through Mark, gives diaspora theorists and writers a poser on status-refugee and exiles. The question put forward by Mark is, why “Do white people always assume every black person travelling is a refugee?” (42) The supposition here is that: every black migrant of African descent is illegal. Here also, Habila takes a swipe at the host governments’ institutions which treat African migrants shabbily. African migrants in *Travelers* in general are treated as mendicants and by extension, alienated. Even in social circles where African migrants are given expressive forum, they are seen as pest and most be weeded.

African migrant characters like Mark who come in contact with whites are racially profiled and poorly received. They on the other hand believe whites have trust issues. Mark's conversation with Anna and a group of white people addresses this. He makes the white guests uncomfortable with his quirky presence and his probing questions on race and migrant conditions. At a point, he laments, "Women hug their bags when I am in the vicinity..." (43). This misgiving that all blacks are criminals and violent is further buttressed by the Nameless narrator in an incident he recreates when he approaches a policeman looking for direction in Penn Station, in the United States. He stresses, "...And as I got closer to him I saw his hand inching towards his gun at his waist." (43). This profiling is emblematic of almost most black experiences of racism in Euro-American spaces and sardonically, in their discussions of race and spatial receptivity, the white characters think that "The race situation in Germany is good, no? Better than America" (43). Habila's white characters are not in denial of racism like Adichie's. Instead, they believe that the harshness of race is more in the USA than in Europe.

Mark in Habila's *Travelers* interrogates institutionalized racism as a reason for disillusionment. When he is proscribed as a refugee, he is sent to the Heim, a supposed *home*. But he soon realizes that the heim/home is bleaker than Dicken's *Bleak House*. He notes, "Heim. Home. This was the most un-homely home I had ever seen" (57). Habila moralizes using this scenario, that in seeking home outside of the homeland, migrants should note that not all heims (home) are homes. Apart from the dilapidated structures in very rotten condition, quite obvious to the visitors are drunken men packed together like stuffed animals and the Nameless narrator recounts his experience:

...As we passed in front of more open doorways and stepped over more stockpiles of trash-almost fainting from the stink-nodding at the men congregated in groups on the balcony or standing idly by the windows, I seemed to be passing through some region of Dante's *Inferno*. (59-60)

Like most life's journeys diasporic adventures can be appreciated with adequate preparations put in place for

it. This paper does not argue against the joys of diasporic migrations but against predominantly illegal migrations charted on illusions. The allusion to Dante's *Inferno* stresses the different degrees of frustration immanent in diasporic situations. It points to the realization that while some are miserable, others can be more miserable than the rest. This analogy brings John Milton's controversial dictum to bear: "It is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven". The Nigeria homeland whether or not it offers any comfort, is here personified as *Hell*. Surprisingly, the alienating host land, in spite of the debilitating servitude it subjects migrants to and its attendant trauma, represents heaven and is so preferred. Another deprecatory representation of the host land space in *Travellers* is the prejudiced relation between migrants and a group in the host land tagged "nativists". The nativist philosophy justifies the claim that racism is innate, learnt and institutionalized. A nativist is a person whose loyalties are first to the principles of nativism—the idea that people born in a country are superior to people whose belongingness to the same country is marked by their migrant status. Habila harps on this thematic preoccupation of space and identity in the portrayals of David aka Moussa, Juma and Mark aka Mary. In the final chapters of *Travellers*, we see an open protest against African migrants, "Fucking foreigners" (155), "Foreigners out" (255). As also seen in the text, nativists' entitlement mentality usually spearheads violent confrontations with migrant factions pushed to either defend themselves or face elimination. In such situations, nativists always have the backings of the State Security Agents who themselves assume a predatory position against the migrants.

In *Travellers*, Habila criticises the treatment of African migrants who seek asylum, and refuge from their home countries. Their unprecedented and inexplicable deaths of this group in their host land is conspicuously executed by both State and non-State actors. One may argue that Habila skims at the topic of violent confrontations between nativists versus migrants. But in the discourse of migrant death, Habila seems unhurried, or dismissive in engaging with the topicality of Nigerian migrants' fatality in their diasporic ventures. As a postcolonial text lending its voice to marginalized texts, it may seem a hot potato for some postcolonial writings to represent migrants'

traumatic deaths. But Habila does not shy from emphasizing the topic of African migrants' deaths and their implicating linkages to the host land's institutions of power. Both Mark's and David/Moussa's deaths are direct results of violent confrontations between state apparatuses of power and migrants. This reactionary ideal plays out every day in migrants' lives who in their disillusionment, lash out and are lashed. This situation further compounds migrants' alienation, especially when they are faced with open confrontations against the apparatuses of power and the nativists. A capitalist parlance has a verdict that adjudges "the customer" as being "always right". The irony of this is that the migrant being the customer in this set up, is never right and is rather always at the receiving end.

One of such confrontations which ends in the death of a migrant is that of David. The social media has countless cases similar to those of Moussa/David indicted for interracial spousal killings. The narrative voice insists that "His wife killed him" (125), his wife retells "I...Pushed him with *all my might* unto a moving train" (156). Moussa/David's death is a textual replication of viral cases of migrants' exemplified by that of the Nigerian, Christian Tobechukwu (Toby) Obumseli, repeatedly stabbed to death by his American girlfriend, Courtney Tailor. Obumseli's case which occurred as recently as August 2022 bears a similar narrative plot structure to David/Moussa and Katharina's. Portia, David's sister believes his brother's murderer deserves to be executed but she is "Sent away for three years" (146), "They gave me three years, not for murder, but for what we call *Totschlag*, manslaughter" (156). In Toby's case, it is even one of the nativists that draws the world's attention to this gruesome migrant injustice. Shortly after Toby's death and the culprit is immediately set free, the *Twitter* handle by the name Ashbutterflybby415 narrates:

It seems as though this story is being silenced. Courtney Tailor killed her boyfriend Christian Obumseli on Sunday night in their Miami apartment. She's been baker acted so the news can't release her name. It's not confirmed whether or not she killed him in his sleep or if he was awake and this was during an altercation. What we do know is that she did stab him and took his life. Please don't support her in buying

any of her content. And as the story unfolds we will share more. Just wanting to make sure the media doesn't make Christian out to be the bad guy. We're speaking on this because my boyfriend and I were closest to them in friendship and after talking to their family it seems as though they were in the dark about how toxic their relationship was and all the abuse that happened leading up to this. (*Twitter*, August 2022).

Several cases of Nigerian migrants who have lost their lives to toxic inter-racial relationships in their host communities abound. Nigerians especially have been receiving negative global attention for their aggressive sexual prowess. Some of these relationships have ended in deaths with justice eluding the victims eventually. The contention here is not against inter-racial relationships, but when such relationships are built on objectification and commodification, their relevance to migrants' American Dream then deserves scrutiny. One such scrutiny is Habila's deployment of Portia in *Travellers*, to raise pertinent questions bothering on interracial attractions, "What is it about black men that acts like a super-magnet to these white women: curiosity, the exotic factor, love or pity?" (110). In the end, both male characters—fictional and real—are dead and their deaths are unresolved to the satisfaction of the aggrieved families. The ultimate aim here for Habila, is to warn Nigerian migrants in particular and African migrants, in general, to either abstain from, or be mindful of any interracial relationship that is raised on falsehood, considering its likelihood to end in disaster. The conviction here for Habila, is that individuals owe themselves the responsibility of charting their diasporic destinations with extreme care and considerations. Interestingly, his didactic moralizing finds a gracious landing on the situations of current and prospective illegal African migrants whose precarity the novel dissects.

3.1.1 Disillusionment Tropes in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

The choice of the word "tropes" in this section is to show the generic repetitiveness of the preoccupation in diasporic genre. Tropes are often portrayed as thematic repetitiveness. It has been viewed from a negative viewpoint as narrative clichés. In spite of this, there still are recurrent and saleable tropes like the "damsel in distress" and "the chosen one" that readers over the years have never been tired of due to the

narratological structures or packaging by authors. Its banality notwithstanding, it remains a focal literary tool. According to Dino Music, the true value of tropes lies in the fact that their use opens up corridors of communication with all previous narratives that have used them - they provoke thoughts, opinions, and discussions. Exploring, subverting, and imitating tropes give birth to new narratives from which even more shall certainly sprout.

Migrant characters' collective manifestation of shattered worldview on finding out that something is not as good as hoped, or that previously held beliefs are false, are the melting points of disillusionment. However, the positive valence of disillusionment which tackles the idea that migrants wake up to the illusions or reality is enunciated as well. Here, characters are interrogated as they manifest irreconcilable confusion stemming from their shock at the wide gulf between their hostile realizations and what was anticipated but never experienced. The shock is equally followed by certain claustrophobic, largely negating decisions borne from their hostile realizations hitting home. These constitute the discourse kernel here, under the rubrics of disillusionment tropes. Some major tropes collated from Habila's *Travellers* are shame, drunkenness, silence, alienation, and aggression or violence and return. It also follows that since tropes are the means by which a story is told by anyone who has a story to tell, these easily definable story structures are broadly discussed here as psychological and physical manifestations of disillusionive behaviours.

3.1.2 Psychological disillusionment in Habila's *Travellers*

Disillusionment is a poster subject-matter under psychological discourses in Habila's *Travellers*. A key expressive outlet for this subject-matter as deduced in *Travellers* is shame. Disillusionment is like pregnancy and its characteristic fixation on growth into maturation. Simply put, it does not occur at once. Rather, it takes time to fester before boiling over. For instance, in the biblical story of the prodigal son, at different junctures in his migratory journey, he realizes that home and abroad connote variegated significations and meanings. The same recognition happens to the African migrant who passes through some experiences regarded as a walk of shame in their

diverse host land. These experiences are shocking and unanticipated but in their shame, a lesson or two can be learnt. Shame as a bi-product of diasporic disillusionment manifests in bilateral ways. Shame is a yardstick for the refusal to return and the other hand, the driving force behind a return. The former is sometimes built on the foundations of optimism as migrants presume that their situations might change if they are patient and keep fighting the unjust system in the host land. The latter is raised on several altars, with nationalism playing a major part in it. Home as the place where the heart is, is also a moralizing compass to this form of return. In all, when characters in their lived experiences face challenges that bring them shame or create tensions that contravene their worldviews and their expectations, they take actions-to stay or to return.

In Adichie's *Americanah* for instance, Ifemelu faces this moral dilemma which Adichie refers to as craziness in her experience with the Tennis Coach. That same experience inadvertently boosts her resolve to conquer racism, unemployment and lack of identity challenges that come her way. In Habila's *Travellers*, the Nameless Narrator also walks his own walk of shame in his first-hand experience as a refugee. Habila presents migrants' shameful experiences doomed from the point of arrival. In stressing this point, he collects and recreates the Trans-Atlantic slave narrative experience by re-enacting pains, trauma and anguish in his depiction of refugees' situations. In his asylum days, the Nameless Narrator recreates the bedlam, "Nearby a woman sat on the hard pebbly ground, moaning softly, all the time knocking her head against the fence" (202). This woman who is said to have lost her children at sea and full of despair "Sits here every day to listen to the voices of her children who drowned" (203). The director of the refugee camp narrates other migrants' despair:

A week ago a man hanged himself in one of the bathrooms. Another woman went crazy and started screaming for no reason around the camp, she was subdued, but that night stabbed herself to death. Another man managed to scale this fence and threw himself into the waves, he drowned immediately (203).

After spending harrowing days in a traumatic refugee camp such as the type highlighted above due to his misplaced visa, the Nameless narrator describes months of despair, shameful incarceration, and after regaining his freedom narrates:

In the bedroom I stared at my reflection in the mirror: my hair had thinned and turned white at the sides. Friends in Nigeria and in the US had looked at me once, twice, sometimes thrice before uttering my name with a question mark, unsure if it was really me. My bones showed at the collar, my cheeks were sunken, but I liked to think the fire still blazed in my eyes.

-What happened? She asked.

- I am fine, I said. (241)

The young man here, once vibrant, has become enfeebled from losing his productive years in some asylum/prison in a dark corner of Europe. His experience further accentuates Habila's thematic thrust in *Travellers*, especially its ostensible corralling of many young Nigerian migrants who continue to smart from losing their productive years in some Western jails or refugee camps. In this character's walk of shame, he, like many other Nigerian migrants, refuses to acknowledge his wasted years abroad in his search for the elixir of life. But he claims, "But I liked to think the fire still blazed in my eyes". Ironically, spatial discourses are seemingly often bipedal: where some see hopelessness, others have their eyes swamped with hope. Even the character of Karim Al-Bashir, a migrant from Somalia whose family is displaced also has the same hopefulness in his eyes. He flees Somalia to be able to safeguard his family from the lecherous hold of a neighborhood gangster who wants his under-age daughter as wife. Little did he know he would lose his son to the Jehovah's Witness who *steals* him in Bulgaria. His eyes lack the required fire when he appeals to his son to rethink, "What you want with these people...? They will break our family. They are like cult" (187). Oddly, after losing his son to religious fundamentalism, Karim's eyes continue to retain some inexplicable spark of migrant hope in them, the harrowing ordeals he and his family pass through nonetheless.

The narrative persona, in all these, lampoons the strings of self-destructing hopefulness. What is hopeful fire if one may ask? Does the fire of life of which these characters seek require irredeemable

wandering, or irredeemable wasted years? Who cares about a meaningless fire if sons and daughters are daily being displaced and ultimately debased on the altars of illusive greener pastures? In all, the host land squalor and disillusionment collude to make these characters' stories of the diaspora more appealing and mentally challenging to the audience.

3.2 Alienation and Surviving Diasporic Disillusionment

Other psychological modes of disillusionment expressed through characters' alienation ordeals abound. They are each captured as fragmented silences and withdrawals from the host land up until their advancement into aggressive denunciations of an unjust system. Conventional wisdom advertises silence as golden. Much of this goldenness does Gayatri Spivak contradict in her postcolonial article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak in the article, stresses the struggles of the subaltern bullied into a stifled existence in the position of the Other, to grovel for a position exclusively reserved for a subject. Vanessa Guignery in her Introduction to *Voices and Silence*, notes that silence is not necessarily the opposite of speech, and needs not be equated to absence, lack, block, withdrawal or blank (as is often the case in Western tradition). If anything, Vanessa insists that silence is a willful decision not to say or unsay that which can be forced, deliberate, and even traumatic (2). In migrants' silences, the reader becomes an interior monologue doing his utmost to abide by an unwritten code binding him to never voice an unmet expectation or dwell on the bric-a-brac of *ifs* is unwise and meaningless. It is pertinent to note that silences manifest in numerous ways, all of which Habila cogently explores to show migrants' discontent.

In his disillusioned state, the Nameless Narrator takes to silence, withdrawal, negligence and hallucination. In fact, in his several internal monologues, he accompanies his doubts with the questioning of his own very existence. In one such episode when people come to stare at him like some caged animal, he wonders: "Who is to say I am not dead already, the people around me could be shadows, wraiths, like me. If I am alive, then I am barely alive. Barely walking, mostly standing and staring at the water (208). Even in silence, deeper probing into man's consciousness in

his society becomes a fundamental exercise. For writers like Hans Georg Gadamer, the 'fruitful' question is a driving force for understanding. It is laden with the opportunity 'to open up possibilities and keep them open' (Gadamer p.298). The Nameless Narrator in his quest for answers, comes to a certain crossroads about his existence as a migrant, and a Nigerian. His realization of how badly he has been ensnared in a squalid state, facilitates his advancement into self-purgation of previously held, alluring diaspora illusions. It is at this point that the protagonist decides to return back to Nigeria to rekindle his existence, and to achieve various forms of available reinforcements. Of course, Europe leaves an indelible mark on him that would later influence his choice of diasporic destination. But Africa for him is therapeutic and energizing.

Habila's Juma is a silent, deep, brooding character who migrates into reticence as therapy for his agonizing experiences in the various European countries he traverses. He ups his silence ante by introducing withdrawal and a hunger strike in his therapy (255). For George Steiner in *Language and Silence*, Habila's propagation of silence like J M Coetzee's iconic Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*, and Friday in *Foe*, stems from "the failure of the word in the face of the inhuman" (51). Ethically also, Juma's deployment of hunger strike as a non-violent resistance mechanism, is a last resort against the harsh policies of 21st century diaspora.

Surprisingly, Habila retools drunkenness as an unconventional measure against disillusionment in *Travellers*. Habila's *Travellers* is interestingly not alone in this route. Okey Ndibe's *Foreign God's, Inc*, Akwaeze Emezi's *Freshwater*, Segun Afolabi's *Goodbye Lucille* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* amongst others, have their disillusioned migrants embracing alcoholism to shirk their agonies. For instance, young characters in the afore-mentioned texts are always in some binge-drinking carousel. The adults on the other hand frequent places of unhealthy drinking in some circles. In the end, Habila shows that drinking and alcoholism can reconfigure characters' perceptions of space, emotion and even place. Finally, Habila's narrative in *Travellers*, indicates that old words give birth to new meanings that are strange to the diasporic narrative lexicon. Some of these words

convey the excess baggage of *doubleness*. Other words like *refugeeism*, *exile*, *asylum* and *citizenship* are demystified and dramatized. They are seen in asymmetrical light and further accelerate the knowledge of African migrant and Nigerian diaspora in particular in the diasporic spaces.

CONCLUSION

C.S. Lewis once stressed the indubitable significance of literature as both enriching and additive to the dynamics of material realities. More than everything else, his perception of literature underscores "The necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the desert that our lives have already become" (12). Texts cast in the mould of Habila's *Travellers* act as vantage points to which rational thoughts and analysis are interrogated. *Travellers* is a literature of deterrence that adds to the teeming footnote of the 21st century African diaspora. Assigned the task of narrativizing 21st century African diasporic experiences, just like the fictive character Gina, Habila succeeds in weaving a web diasporic sensibilities in *Travellers*. The outcome bears spatial relations to time and place, whereas the thematic preoccupation does not amplify the positives of diaspora, but rather estranges them, especially when charted on the frontiers of illegality. What Habila does in *Travellers* is to propagate, inform and subtly dissuade illegal migration and poorly charted diaspora. One pertinent truth is that the massive influx of Africans to Western spaces is premised on the homeland's failing socio-economic and cultural systems. This informs the representation of Habila's fictive characters as fated with existentialist overdose of precarity aptly rendered as trauma, repression, oppression, disillusionment, displacement and dehumanization in their lived experiences. Habila advances the precarity discourse by polarizing and philosophizing the old versus the new verities of African diaspora. He draws the reader's attention to old but recurrent thematic realities like racism, exile, and corruption against newer verities headlined by religious fundamentalism, globalization, asylum and refugeeism. Habila equally touches on other newer realities dressed as socio-political and economic insecurities, interracial sexual relationships, identity and gender issues. He interrogates human existence via constant references to Dante and Dickens amongst

other social realists to cogently implicate malevolent governance in both the homeland and the host land and their encouraging conspiracies against humanity.

In the end, this paper explores and unearths established palimpsests of the African diasporic limbo. It animates migrants' experiences of precarious roots and routes in the quest to chart newer dreams in hostile Western spaces. In journeys such as Habila's *Travellers* projects, African migrants find themselves inadvertently imploding into rootlessness, homelessness, statelessness and alienation via eclectic unwelcoming attitudes traditional to the 21st century host land. Though it might be entirely out of place to call out Habila's *Travellers* as a dark text, but amid the diasporic gore, fragmentation and dehumanization lies a trace of hope resonated in the productive return. It is therefore rational to submit that despite the protagonist not eventually returning to his actual homeland, he nonetheless returns to an African country where "Schokolade" does not connote racism but a type of beverage.

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