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## Translocation and Migrants' Live-in Experiences: A Literary Discourse on Select Novels

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### Abstract

With the huge surge of African migrants in the West, especially in the post Covid-19 era, it becomes important to investigate these migrants' experiences as portrayed in literary texts by writers. Hence, this research examines the representation of migrant challenges in African literature through a critical discourse on two contemporary novels: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel* and *Heart* and Helon Habila's *Travelers*. Adopting Homi Bhabha's theory, hybridity, the study focuses on how these literary works depict the struggles of African Migrants as they navigate and interpret both cultures– West/African while in the diaspora in order to survive. The discourse highlights the issues of displacement, dislocation, alignment, cultural identity, and the struggle for survival in a foreign land. By exploring the similarities and differences between the two novels, the paper reveals the complexity and diversity of African migrant experiences as it provides insights into the broader issues of globalization, colonialism, and migration. Ultimately, the research argues that African literature plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the migrant experiences and in promoting social justice and human rights.

**Keywords:** Migrant, Hybridity, Survival, Identity, Africa

## **Introduction**

In recent times, there has been a constant movement of people, the immediate result of this is that nothing is stable and borders have become mixed. According to Toyin Falola “the outstanding developments in the field of communication technology such as satellite, TV, Internet and the modern means of transportation followed by the globalization of the world economy are all the influential factors in making our age the age of mobility and borderlessness” (9). The traditional settler life-form has given its place to a new nomadic life style and migration has become a familiar trend. Sten P. Moslund gives a vivid picture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the following passage:

It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, [...] reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world's countries and cities (2).

Migration has come to play an increasingly significant role in relation to such basic social foundations such as politics, economics, geography and culture. However, movement and human restlessness has had a remarkable effect on literature (as a particular cultural production) as well. The appearance of a new kind of writing, called migrant literature is the manifestation of this impact.

Migrant discourse is usually centered on the experiences of migrants, which is basically on how they interact with the culture and tradition of their host countries or new environments. However, though the description of the migrants' experiences and the difficulties of cultural dislocation and alignment play a primary role in migrant literature, yet there is a concern towards the cause of their exit. Katie Petersen avers that:

Migrant literature often focuses on the social contexts in the migrants' country of origin which prompt them to leave, on the experience of migration itself, on the mixed reception which they may receive in the country of arrival, on experiences of racism

and hostility, and on the sense of rootlessness and the search for identity which can result from displacement and cultural diversity. (n.p)

Worthy of note is that men and women migrate for similar reasons, such as the desire for better education, lucrative jobs, to improve their living standard or to reunite with family members. Migration can also be caused by duress, such as the need to flee conflict zones and persecution, or economic instability. In Africa mainly, youths usually migrate due a lack of opportunities, food insecurity, environmental degradation and natural disasters.

Again, societal norms and gender-based discrimination are not the only factors that may influence the migration of women and girls. Labour policies of some countries can also strongly contribute to the migration of women and girls compared to their male counterparts. Many African writers have written extensively on the issues of migration, as they would

usually note that voluntary migration of Africans began at end of the slave trade in the late nineteenth century, mainly for the purposes of education. Writers, like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka did not only write about migration, they experienced it, as they strive to survive in their writing career by going on exile due to persecution and the high of disillusionment in the. According Kabore, “they wrote some of their works while on exile. Achebe and Soyinka wrote about social injustice, including migration, at home and abroad” (16). However, to Leslie Adelson “literature of migration is not written by migrants alone” (qtd. in Walkowitz, 533) because what distinguishes the migrant writers from the non-migrant is not the geographical borders and places, but the hybrid nature of their works.

In retrospect, African writers have been caught up in the web of migration issues for long, especially during early postcolonial rule due to their involvement with nationalist struggles for independence in their various

African countries. Many of them seek refuge in neighbouring countries or distant lands like Britain and America. Thus, from about the late 1950s, the tradition of writers in exile emerged. Writing from the Diaspora, like the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Bessie Head, Doris Lessing, Alex La Guma, and Dennis Brutus, among others, tackled colonialism, imperialist and neo-colonial processes as well as high level of impunity and corruption in their countries. Their literary productions are often known for their utilization of the motifs and tropes of alienation, disillusionment, frustration, and isolation. The motifs of alienation and disenchantment have resurfaced in the recent works of African writers writing from Diaspora. Hence hybridity becomes a crucial aspect of contemporary identity discourse, emerging from the complex interactions between different cultures, communities, and histories.

Roy Sommer sees the transcultural, hybrid literature as involving “visions of the dissolution of fixed cultural identities and the assertion of

cosmopolitan hybridization and ethnic fragmentation” as counter-models to "exclusive national or ethnic identities” (Sommer; qtd in Moslund, 5). He advocates the fluid nature of this fiction because of such inherent features as “in-betweenness”, “borderless cosmopolitanism” and “transitory identities” as inseparable parts of the theme. These features – which have their roots in Bhabha's concept of hybridity – have now become the basic characteristics to classify a literary work as literature of migration.

Due to these characteristics, Ladan Siad, sees Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Gravel Heart*, as a novel which portrays hybridity as a complex and fluid phenomenon that challenges traditional notions of fixed identity categories. Siad argues that Gurnah’s depiction of hybridity highlights the potential for creative and transformative experiences that arise from cultural mixing. Again, in “Cultural Hybridity and Diasporic

Consciousness in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*" by Xiaojie Wang, his representation of hybridity contributes to a broader critique of colonialism and its legacies. Wang suggests that Gurnah's portrayal of hybridity can be seen as a means of subverting colonial power structures and reclaiming cultural agency. While in *The Guardian*, Arifa Akbar describes *Gravel Heart* as a "powerful meditation on hybridity and identity," (8) noting that Gurnah's writing "is at its most powerful when it captures the complex interiorities of his characters as they navigate multiple worlds." (8) Akbar also praises the novel's "layered and nuanced approach to questions of identity and belonging." (8).

In the same vein, in Helon Habila's *The Traveler* the idea of hybridity focuses on how the novel represents the experience of living between cultures, the challenges of maintaining one's identity in a foreign culture, and the ways in which hybridized characters can create new forms of cultural expression. Olusegun Adegunle examines how the novel portrays



the hybridized identity of the protagonist, the unnamed narrator, a Nigerian, who navigates between western societies for survival. Adekunle argues that the protagonist's experiences highlight the challenges of navigating two cultures, and how the process of hybridity can lead to new forms of creativity and self-expression. However, Jessica Murray examines the role of language as a major concern in hybridity discourse. Murray is of the view that the use of multiple languages in the novel reflects the protagonist's experience of cultural hybridity and challenges cultural dislocation and alignment.

### **Migrants Experiences in the Novels**

Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*, is a reflection of migrants' unexplainable realities, as the novel can be perceived as his autobiography. Like many of his works, the novel focuses on the factors that propelled his migration from Zanzibar to the United Kingdom. First Uncle Amir, Salim's maternal

uncle, works as a diplomat in London, married to Asha, the daughter of the Vice President of the country, and the couple agreed to take Salim along with them in order to "...get him away from that feeble-minded man and give him a new start" (48). The feeble-minded man being referred here is Masud, the father of Salim. Uncle Amir usually disregards him and treats him with scorn especially after being divorced by his wife Saida.

The protagonist, Salim's relocation to London opens a new discourse in the story. The attention is shifted from the dictatorial Zanzibarian leaders in African experiences as migrants in London. Salim notices the cosmopolitan nature of London and according to him, "London is full of people from everywhere in the world. I just had not expected to see that Indians, Arabs, Africans, Chinese and I don't know where all the European people come from but they are not all English". (62)

Salim discovers that life in London is not as rosy as he had imagined. He begins to learn from using the cutleries, which according to uncle Amir is

“... not about becoming a European stooge and giving up your culture... No, it’s not about losing anything. It is to begin thinking about food as a pleasure, as a refinement” (59). Other things that Salim had to learn fast in order to be able to fit in properly into the English society, according to him, include:

I learnt to live in London to avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness, to avoid curiosity, not to feel desolate at hostile stares and to walk purposefully wherever I want. I learnt to live with the code and the dirt and to evade the angry students at college with their swagger and their sense of grievance and their expectations of failures (66).

The narrator makes it known that his life is engulfed with panic and anxiety while in London. The English society is hostile to the immigrants and many of them live and struggle to survive in panic. Salim laments, “...I thought I could study without being interested but I had not anticipated the anxieties of living in an alien and hostile city without the

company of other students like myself or the nagging persistence of my mother.” (67).

Another aspect in the narration is the issue of identity. This issue is central to any discourse on migration, and Gurnah lucidly explores it in his work. According to Salim, Mr. Mark, the owner of Café Galileo, always speaks Arabic with his friends. But one of the days he asked him, “where are you from with a name like that” (108). Salim simply answers “Zanzibar,” which Mark utters as “Zinjibar” (109), the old Arabic pronunciation of the coastal city. Mark refers to Zanzibar as belonging to “the Dark continent, darkest, darkest Africa” (109). Sophie too, Basil’s girlfriend, calls Salim “...a poor Indian ocean boy” (11). So, Salim sees his identity under serious attacks due to his name, looks and country of origin. According to him:

In the three years, I had been in England until then, I had kissed some girls at parties when words were not required—snogged some girls at parties... To be honest, I was snogged by three girls

at three separate parties when I had done little to deserve their attention. One of them told me, as she was pulling my shirt out and reaching into my jeans that she would have gone to bed with me if I were not black. (112)

The English society is highly a racially conscious society. The black people are discriminated against because of the color of their skin. They can be tolerated in the English society but are not fully accepted as part of the English society.

Furthermore, housing and accommodation problem is another aspect of life of the Black immigrants is faced with in England. Most of the buildings they occupy are always out of place and mostly inhabitable and descript. One of such houses is the house that Salim shares with five other foreign students. Salim comments on the state of the house.

It was a dirty house and I thought it would be cold in the winter. The windows were loose and rattled in the wind. The carpets and rugs were thread bare scraps that were impossible to clean but which produced fibres and dust that gave all of us allergies probably for life. The woodwork was enveloped in a powerful

stench of rot that hit me like a diseased Miasma when I entered, and I knew it was not good for any of us. But it could not be helped (114).

The accommodation problem is one of the major problems confronting Africans in the Diaspora. Salim reports many instances of the accommodation problems that he faces. According to him, “At the beginning of my final year, I moved to a one bedroom upstairs flat with an annoying leaking cistern the landlord’s plumber could not fix” (119).

In *Travelers*, Habila uses imagery to illustrate the poor living conditions of the migrants. Heim, where the narrator and Lorelle go in search for Mark, due to his release from police detention can be described as a typical slum. The narrator states that: “The smell hit us even before we entered the building: fetid and moist and revolting. Heim. Home. This was the most unhomely place I had ever seen” (p. 43). This depicts how African migrants are living in an unappealing, repulsive and unpleasant living conditions. The narrator uses vivid and strong language to describe the

terrible living conditions, emphasizing that it is even worse than the living conditions of animals.

Another aspect in the novel is the issue of language. Although the migrants in the novel face a range of experiences, but one of the problems he encounters after having successfully crossed the borders is language barrier. So many new migrants in Germany have trouble in communicating with the locals because they are not conversant with local language. This can make them feel even more like outsiders. For example, the narrator had trouble at the post office because they could not speak German, and the lady in charge would not speak English. According to him:

A month ago I had gone to the post office to post a letter, and the lady behind the counter, a flaxen-haired battle-ax, 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. It was a tense standoff while it lasted, and I was sweating when I came out. A week later I started taking German classes (pp. 7-8).

Unfortunately, the German lady speaks English but she pretends not to understand the narrator, in order to subject him to learning German. However, the scenario makes the narrator to feel helpless as he is unable to communicate. This situation is like the narrator's voice being invisible. In fixing this, the narrator decides to learn German so he can be heard and accepted in the community.

Again, Habila portrays the challenges of migrants' sense of habituation. Migrant literature often explores the discourses on multiculturalism, where migrants encounter various new cultures all through their journey. While some of the cultural practices may seem unusual to them, they learn to adapt and become accustomed to the new reality in order to cope with culture shock. It is on this note that Manu's daughter, Rachida, on getting to Berlin, experiences culture shock of seeing 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 (57).

The obscene pictorial representation seems weird to Rachida who understands that posing nakedly is immoral. However, to cope with the cultural and moral value of the new place she finds herself, she will learn to live with it, and perceive it a norm, a usual expectation, as she tries to concentrate on her 'business' at Berlin. Many migrants usually learn to cope in their new society, irrespective of their religious belief or traditional norms.

## **Conclusion**

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and Helon Habila's *Travelers* are novels that explore migration discourse, highlighting the challenges and experiences of individuals who leave their homeland in search of better opportunities. The novels illustrate the complexities of migration and the harsh realities that many migrants face, including poverty, exploitation, and violence. The narratives also highlight the impact of migration on families and communities, as well as the tension between social reality and cultural identity. These novels also demonstrate the power dynamics that exist between migrants and their host societies. They also explore the ways in which migrants often have to compromise their cultural identities and adapt to new ways of life in order to survive. One key finding is that migration is often driven by economic and political factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and conflict, and that the lack of opportunities in

migrants' home countries which pushes them to seek better and quality life elsewhere.

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