



**ASSIMILATION EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANTS IN HELON HABILA'S
TRAVELERS**

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Abstract

Migration from one country to another is a complex psychosocial process with lasting effects on an individual's identity. The experience of first migrating and then, attempting to integrate in a destination society is practically and interactionally formidable. This paper evaluates the experiences of immigration and assimilation experiences of migrants to decipher how the social processes of interaction affect and effect migrants' experiences in host countries. Using Social Psychology as a stand point, this paper argues that migration experiences highlighted in Helon Habila's *Travelers* indicate that migrants experience stereotyping and stigmatization experiences that have to do with cultural, class, and racial discrimination. These daunting experiences during the process of dynamic shifts in culture and identity results in certain relational challenges between the cultures which are about to 'clash'. The paper concludes by suggesting how incorporating social psychological perspectives into migration and assimilation can aid the political, social

and economic mechanisms that will ensure mutual respect for migrants who are seeking better lives through migration.

Keywords: Migration, assimilation, social psychology, stereotyping, stigmatisation

Introduction

When people migrate to other climes, on arrival in their host countries, they often traverse unaccustomed and most times hostile social institutions. Sometimes, these experiences occur as a result of limited social inabilities. Many, if not all, encounter discrimination at some point and endure exploitative and demeaning socially discriminating conditions. These and other conditions of migration and settlement complicate migrants' efforts to "assimilate" into their new communities. Basically, migration from one country to another is a complex and multifaceted psychosocial process which has with it significant and lasting effects on a migrant's identity. This implies that leaving one's country involves weighty psychological losses. During this period, the migrant has to give up certain cultural indices like familiar food, previously unchallenged social customs, and language. Consequently, the new and host country offers strange social embellishments which clash with the migrant's personality and culture. Practically, the migrants meet new weather condition, food, new cultures, different political and economic concerns, unfamiliar language, and a visually unfamiliar landscape and climatic situations. New channels of self-expression also become strenuous. One thing is clear: migration results in a sudden change from an average expectable environment to a strange and unpredictable one. Traumatic dislocations that mark the experiences of migrants when they leave their native countries are accompanied by the loss of connection to homeland and loved ones; as a resulting to ambivalent receptions in their destination countries.

Migration in African novels has been there since the 1980s. It has attracted criticism to broaden the perspective of earlier scholars on the subject. African writers have therefore been responding to the impact of migration and globalization on their people and continent. Deleva avers that

“globalization has [indeed] changed the face of migration” (5). Some emerging novelists of the late twentieth century to the present twenty-first century, in addition to their social commitment, have deepened the knowledge on migration by engaging issues such as migrants' integration and assimilation in host countries. Consequently, frustrations and disappointment arising from economic collapse, political instability, insecurity, corruption, infrastructural decay and unfulfilled life become worrisome causing the mobility of especially young African population to Western nations. This scenario has persisted and up until recently, African citizens are disillusioned and have been seeking for greener pastures outside African nations. Migration has become the best option as these young Africans move out for greener socio-economic pastures. Okafor helps us to understand this sad state of African nations when he says that, [t]he catastrophic collapse of the economics of most independent African nations has in recent times triggered another exodus from the continent. This time, however, the emigration is voluntary and involves the most educated members of the various African states. This brain drain has over the years created a second African diaspora in America and the Western World. (28)

This means that novelists focus on this issue of migrants' assimilation in host countries to reveal what motivates them to migrate, and how they try to settle down in their new found land. The experiences of these migrants before migration, and their migrant experiences thus become the critical vision of African novelists. The interest in these experiences lies in the obsession that these migrants are alienated in their new and host society, as the society does not accept them fully. Consequently, they find it difficult to integrate and assimilate. Obviously, there is the tendency that an atmosphere of a host society where African migrants, having been forced out of their individual African nations as a result of marginalization, oppression, exploitation and total governmental unfriendliness, still see themselves unaccepted, and alienated in the host western nations they migrate to. The feeling of social rejection pervades among their experiences as demonstrated in the characters of literary texts. Migrant integration and assimilation challenges have been

neglected as a phenomenon that reveals more about what affect migrants when they arrive their destination countries to meet with the cultures of the host countries.

Thus, assimilation in this context implies the struggle over the power to define oneself in a situation where, as migrants, they are trying to adapt to certain cultures in countries they find themselves in. This struggle manifest in a context where members of the host community create and sustain dominance and control over social and cultural resources in the host society. These kind of experiences cause one to construct psychic images and ideas about who they are perceived to be and where they should be positioned in a given society. For that reason, the cognitive processes that underlie stereotyping and stigma are formed. This gives a critical insight into the ways members of the host society view the identity of migrants. Thus, the migrants' efforts at defining themselves pushes them to respond to these negative images as well. According to Hadj Abdou, "migrant integration has been viewed more and more as a local ... task" (2). Contrary to this, it is pertinent to assert clearly that the concept of assimilation in migration is closely inter-related at the societal level. Considering this scope, it becomes fervent that migrants will be allowed to adapt to and familiarize with the host society so as to become a member of the host community by embracing the host culture, values and behaviours. Obviously, when migrants experience glumness, gloominess and misery in host countries, they tend to have a feeling of inferior 'others' as they interact. Kai Hafez identifies three diverse traits of assimilation viz: "[c]ivic integration, including, for example, participation in political processes; Social integration, i.e., material and institutional integration; and Cultural integration, which is necessary for forming personal identities and hybrid" (176). These levels indicate that assimilation aids the process of integration and helps the individual create identities in order to relate to demands for equal rights as they try to survive as migrants. This paper sets out to evaluate the experiences of characters in Habila's *Travelers* to view the challenges they face as migrants trying to assimilate and integrate in their host communities. The essence is to emphasize suggestively that migrant assimilation and integration should

be conceptualized and approached as a governance technique in order to accommodate the diverse differences especially those of migrants.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Psychological Realism as its theoretical framework for analysis. Psychological Realism emanates from Psychoanalytical theory in literary criticism. Psychoanalytical theory observes how the psychology of the characters motivates them into action, or how character's actions, reactions, and development are governed or influenced by their psychological frames. Psychoanalysis is a set of theories related to the study of the unconscious mind. It will not be wrong to say that Freud himself created psychoanalysis. In fact, for several years he worked on it alone and propounded his thoughts and theories through exhaustive writings. He was also the first person to use the term psychoanalysis (in French) in 1896 and he was the one who set the initial tenets of psychoanalytic theory.

However, many others went on to contribute to the development of psychoanalysis. Notable among these were Alfred Adler and Carl Gustav Jung, both mentored by Freud. Others like Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, and Erich Fromm, who came to be known as neo-Freudians (they agreed with Freud on some aspects of psychoanalysis, while disagreeing with him on others) went on to develop their own distinct personality theories. According to Richard basic tenets of psychoanalysis can be said to be the following:

- Instincts are the ultimate cause of all behavior. Some mental processes, such as motives, desires, and memories, are not available to awareness or conscious introspection. Many of the irrational drives that occupy the unconscious formulate human behavioral tendencies as well as cognition.
- While some mental processes are out of our awareness, there is the process of defense mechanism in which people are also motivated to push threatening thoughts or feelings from awareness. Attempts to bring these suppressed thoughts or feelings into awareness are resisted by the defense

mechanisms.

- Any conflicts in the interplay of conscious and unconscious material may give rise to minor or serious mental disturbances and psychopathological conditions (most commonly depression, anxiety, and neurosis).
- The development perspective states that childhood relationships with caregivers play a role in shaping current and future relationships. The individual's development may be driven by forgotten incidents of early childhood, instead of being determined by inherited traits alone.
- The psychodynamic perspective, which emphasizes the importance of individual or personal meaning of events; how a person experiences himself, important others, and the world in general. (Richard 182-3)

Psychoanalytical critical theory, engages the conscious and unconscious actions, inactions, and reactions of characters in a literary text. This engages the personality of the characters. This means that for those experiences a writer invents in his fictional society, there is an unconscious basis. An examination of these, to ascertain what prompts an action, and inactions (behaviour) into an experience, is the critical concern of Psychological Realism as a critical tool in literary criticism.

Flowing from this, Psychological Realism as the literary strand of psychoanalytical criticism that delves on the internal life of the characters emerges. Realism itself is lent to the text through a focus on the thoughts and motivations of the characters rather than on their occupations and external settings alone. The principal aim and characteristic of this criticism is that the characters who inhabit a novel should be believable and living, breathing human beings who the readers can readily and inadvertently relate to. Human beings are complex creatures and it is the functioning of their minds (together with their psychological being) that makes them so. Psychologically realistic texts function with the assertion that it is through an in-depth understanding and portrayal of the human mind and personality that the author can hope to make the world depicted in the novel realistic, meaningful and enriching.

According to Debashish Sen, some literary techniques have been associated with psychological realism and these techniques are what make psychological realism possible (16). Though, no precise technique is requisite in analyzing a novel using psychological realism. One popular technique that has been related psychological realism as 'Stream of Consciousness'. This is used to reveal the mental lives of the characters. In psychology and philosophy, stream of consciousness, introduced by William James, is the set of constantly changing inner thoughts and sensations which an individual has while conscious. In literary criticism, stream of consciousness denotes a literary technique which seeks to describe an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes.

Another technique is Interior monologue. Interior monologue "is a similar technique, in that it lets the reader see the character's thoughts. But in this case, the character's thoughts are not presented chaotically, as in 'stream of consciousness', but are arranged logically, as if the character were making a speech (to himself) in his mind" (Wallek and Warren 15). This inner monologues often occur at the most dramatic points in the narrative and are in harmony with other artistic devices. These monologues take various forms and discharge various artistic functions (17). Their primary function is to reveal deep emotions and the interplay of emotions. This monologues encourage the reader to empathize with the character. Some writers will often present interior monologue in association with specific actions and gestures that work to heighten its effect and revelatory influence. Psychological realists develop a character through several means. Other than a description of the characters and a narration of their life-history, which works to introduce the characters, they use dialogue and techniques like interior monologue and stream of consciousness to take the reader deeper into an understanding of the characters' thoughts and psychology.

Another technique of psychological realism is Psychonarration. It reports the character's thoughts to the reader, representing them in the third person. The narrator remains in the foreground and may add some

general observations (comments) not part of the character's thoughts. We hear the narrator's voice more than the character's. The fourth technique of psychological realism is Narrated Monologue. This is a mix between psycho narration and interior monologue. The narrator often sets the scene, but the character's thoughts are reproduced directly and in a way the character would think though the narrator continues to talk of the character in the third person. The combination of these will be used to arrive at the intentions of the characters' responses to the experiences they face in the host countries as they try to assimilate as migrants in the host countries.

Synopsis of Helon Habila's New Novel, Travelers

Habila's *Travelers* is a traumatic narrative of the experiences of African migrants and refugees seeking safe haven, education and better livelihoods, and economic opportunities in Europe. It recounts the experiences of how migrants face refugee crisis, whether it be Germany, Switzerland, and Italy or those countries that serve as transit points for migrants – Turkey, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria. The novel comprises of six interconnected books. In the initial story, the narrator is a Nigerian expatriate living in the United States with his American wife, Gina, a portrait artist. Their marriage is strained, but when Gina wins a fellowship in Berlin, the narrator joins her in an effort to continue their marriage. As soon as he joins her, he finds himself in discriminatory experiences as he is trying to assimilate and integrate amid Europeans. The narrator befriends Mark, a transgender Malawian film student who has migrated to Berlin to pursue his art. Upset by the exposure to the ugly side of migration, the narrator leaves Gina and travels around Europe, bringing him into contact with other African migrants. During the narration of his trip, he meets Manu, a Libyan of Nigerian extraction who flees his nation for Berlin, where he and his daughter await his wife's arrival from the Mediterranean where she is also in transit to Europe. The next story is that of Portia, the daughter of a Zambian writer, who is chasing the ghosts of her father and brother who both migrated to Switzerland and England respectively. Habila's *Travelers* basically showcases the assimilation experiences of

displaced characters who wrestle with finding their footing in host countries as migrants, homeless and rootless people.

Evaluating Assimilation Experiences of Migrants in Habila's Travelers

Basically, assimilation policies should be seen to encourage migrants to retain their identity, promote their absorption into the host culture so they can eventually become full members of this host communities. This can be feasible first if the context of language is given priority especially in the case of migrants who are making effort to acclimatize to a community as a novice. Because language use “is the commonest form of social behaviour” (Fairclough 248), it is expected that migrants articulate themselves in the language of the host community. Mark's experience at the Post office affirms this fact and further concretizes the notion that language is an important factor of power play which according to Fairclough “nobody who has an interest in relationships of power in modern society can afford to ignore ...”(3). The consequentiality of this is exemplified in the instance where Mark narrates thus:

[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. (9-10)

The actions of employing 'interpreter' and Mark enrolling for German classes goes a long way to clarify the linguistic and cultural barriers which creates difficulty for migrants during assimilation attempts in host communities. Language use involves the creation of diverse prospects which are capable of orienting inter-relationships between various segments of a society. Thus, the rigidity created by the attendant encourages a hoarse emotional reality for Mark which limits the possibilities that could transform Mark (a migrant's) notion of considering the setting as “own community” instead of “host community”.

Migrants face various difficulties trying to assimilate into the social communities they migrate to; often times, their earned credentials become discredited causing them to pick up low-paying jobs, or remain underemployed or at most unemployed at all. The consequences of this culminates into them living in poverty. The eventuality of becoming poor in this circumstances also affects their integration into the social society. An example from the text is that of “Manu, who ... was a doctor in his former life, now he worked as a bouncer in a nightclub, waiting for the result of his asylum application. His face was lined, prematurely old, and I knew Gina would love those lines, each one of them an eloquent testimony to what he had left behind, to the borders and rivers and deserts he had crossed to get to Berlin” (7). Migrants' assimilation into host communities is basically meant to serve two objectives: the interests of the migrant and that of the host society. Yet, in Habila's *Travelers*, migrants are seen struggling to attain and retain their selves which have been wrecked by the host society despite been depending on them to revive their lost selves. The host social conditions have made Mark lose his studentship because “his registration had expired – something to do with school fees, and this had, or soon would, also affect his visa status – which was why he was squatting with friends in the old church in Kreuzberg. For pocket money he freelanced for crew.com” (16). This situation implies that he is being exploited as the objective of assimilating does not favour him. At some instances, migrants are made to take up denigrating jobs. They would work on farms for pocket money (78). Unfortunately, some of these experiences are formalized in a manner that properly institutionalizes the denigrating experiences as a form of exploitation. Evidences abound in the text where and when migrants face stereotypical treatments from members of host communities. Most of these experiences are assumptions and beliefs based on prejudice thoughts and experiences about migrants which create a feeling of them as inferior beings. For instance, Mark narrates his experience thus:

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." (34)

The gesture by the Police officer is a mark of increased discrimination and violence directed against migrants in many parts of the world. Migrants who are not properly registered become vulnerable to racist and xenophobic hostility in countries of destination. Without the registration a human being on transit into a destination country is deemed to lack the legal status to enjoy the social amenities that fellow humans are liable to. This heightens their risks of being stereotyped, exploited and discriminated. For instance, the narrator explains that as "[w]e passed through parks and back streets, avoiding the cruising police vans and large congregations. Our destination was the Berlin-Turkish café, whose owner had been turning away black people, claiming they were all illegal immigrants and drug dealers" (20). Mark needed to go through series of documentation to remain in the country especially as he has no visa. He has to take refuge at a The Flüchtlingsheim – the refugee camp. He eventually moves to stay with Gina at her house with the husband, yet, Gina's husband Dante keeps feeling Mark is a threat to their peace (35). One can imagine the discriminatory perception of host countries aimed at demeaning humans who come to make a living in these countries where they are rather subdued into mere commodities and given harsh nomenclatures. According to the narrator, "[a] woman had once screamed in her face in the Tube in London, dementedly shouting, "Fucking foreigner!" Foreigner, for some reason, was the worst form of insult the woman could think of. She had read in the papers about people being thrown out of moving trains by skinheads for being black" (113). The stigma of being a migrant in this context still remains daunting and psychosocially demeaning critically.

Migrants are also left in unhealthy and demeaning environments in the

name of camps. There is more than enough circumstantial proof to show that violations of human rights of migrants and other non-nationals exist as a feature of international migration today. Migrants suffer violations and abuses in the course of their journeys as they are subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, unlawful killings, sexual exploitation, and a host of other human rights abuses. They most times exploited as forced labour and suffer extortion by officials of state institutions. The camps migrants are placed in are nothing close to human habitable conditions. According to the narrator, the smell was unmistakable, it was more than human effluence and trash, it was the smell of misery and despair. The tents were more recent; the brick structures had been there since the 1920s as offices and temporary staff accommodations when the hill was mined for copper, when the copper veins ran out in the 1940s the mine was turned into a military camp, and when the war ended the site was abandoned to wild goats and rodents, and for decades its brick structures and iron roofs rusted away in the humid, acidic sea air ... it was overcrowded as usual, it was meant to hold five hundred people, but it always had over two thousand migrants.... Toilets had been converted into sleeping spaces, it was either that or leave women and children exposed to the weather. (141-3)

Obviously, prolonged periods of detention of migrants also serves to isolate and stigmatize them causing psychological disorders to these migrants who also face possible death threatening situations in the camps. In those camps, the narrator explains, the migrants “grow apathetic, they withdraw, they neglect their health, and they die” (146). Their deaths are as a result of emotional consequences that plagues their dire conditions as they seek survival and better conditions in their destination countries. Meanwhile, the International human rights law prohibits arbitrary detention generally. Basically, detention becomes arbitrary when it is not in accordance with the legitimate purpose, unjust, unreasonable, or unnecessary in the circumstances. Migrants face discriminatory policies that rather rob them of their destinies and short live dreams of building ties with loved ones and accomplices. These policies do not encourage interpersonal and emotional ties as the migrant is trying to assimilate into the community he has arrived in. For instance, a migrant wants to marry,

when “they went to the registry ... they meet more problems. Instead of getting married he was detained for many days and finally he was deported back to Mali” (79). This is basically total distinction, exclusion, restriction based on national or ethnic origin which has the effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, of a migrant’s human rights and fundamental freedom.

The stereotypical treatments leave the migrants on the status of 'foreigners' in host countries in a manner that stipulates that a migrant needs thorough documentation like a commodity to stay on the host countries soil. Obviously, “a black person's relationship with Europe would always need qualification—he or she couldn't simply be native European, there had to be an origin explanation” (120); meaning that a migrant does not have all the prerequisites except s/he has proper documentation to remain on that land. This still sounds like the apartheid experiences that South African faced. While the process of assimilating seems to require migrants to engage in some type of identity work in order to assimilate, perspectives have to be focused on how they are treated even as humans. By this examination we can begin to construct an accurate picture of the lives of contemporary migrants and what they face in practicality trying to assimilate in host countries.

Conclusion

Western countries, international migration bodies and organisations like Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the European Union (EU) need to know and acknowledge the fact that apart from social, political and economic instabilities across third world countries, the increase in ethnic and racial diversity of societies has aided the consequences of migration. This goes to indicate that increasing migration means that a number of continents, especially Africa have become or are becoming multi-ethnic, and are confronted with the challenge of accommodating peoples of different cultures, races, religions and language in the face of harsh social and economic instabilities. Thus, addressing the reality of increased diversity means finding political, legal,

social and economic mechanisms to ensure mutual respect and to mediate relations across differences when and where they exist. The consciousness should be circulated that this phenomena will continue unabated “it is as if some homing device, focused toward Europe, is implanted in [the migrants'] brains and it never stops humming till their feet are on European soil (80) meaning that the situation will continue, and the attempts to control the influx by maltreating the migrants will not yield positive gains. Therefore, inclusive strategies and policies need to be drawn to incorporate and accommodate the influx of migrants into host countries so as to reduce violence perpetrated against migrants by authorities of host countries whose activities pose threats to their personalities. This will reduce the risk of migrants becoming stranded and vulnerable en route to host countries.

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