

Cosmopolitan Peregrination: The 'Push and Pull' in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

Joy I. Nwiyi

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University, Lafia

Abstract

Human mobility has gained even greater importance in modern times with immigrant's search for safe havens and 'homes' predominantly in Europe and America and other parts of the world away from indigenous homes. This paper examines the complexities of cosmopolitan peregrination and the 'push and pull' factors that serve as the reason for the complex immigrant existence represented in Helon Habila's *Travellers*. Helon Habila is a cosmopolitan and postcolonial writer whose location and creative perspectives have earned him these positions. This paper which is premised on postcolonial literary theory and sociologist, Everett Spurgeon Lee's 'push-pull' migration theory argues that Habila's novel projects considerably the process of immigration, implicating 'push' and 'pull' factors in the refugee, asylum seeker and immigrant's persistent sense of dislocation, complex identity and belonging. The study identifies unstable socio-political climates that foster unrests, dictatorships, wars, and economic instability as push factors; while the stability of Western cosmopolitan cities remains the appeal for perhaps the fulfilment of fragile expectations. It concludes that Habila unifies these factors in engaging, as well as problematizing the subject, and politics that cultivates cosmopolitan peregrinations and complex immigrant existence across national borders and international borders.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan, immigrant, push and pull factor, dislocation, belonging, *travellers*

Introduction

Human mobility has gained even greater importance in modern times with immigrant's search for safe havens and 'homes' predominantly in Europe and America and other parts of the world away from indigenous homes. In recent times, Africans have migrated willingly and voluntarily to other continents of the world in search of greener pastures, with lingering economic and socio-political forces making these flights possible. Cosmopolitan peregrination is therefore been enabled by different factors that make migration and perhaps continuous mobility a sustainable option in recent times. Joanna Kosmalka posits that while migration could be voluntary or involuntary, it is important that contemporary mobility that is voluntary must not be initiated as the result of prior or violent cohesion, must have the potential to meet basic social and physical needs, and provide the existence of an exit option at the moment when the decision to relocate is made. It means, among other things, that the migrants are able to return to their country of origin or move to another destination if they wish to change their situation. (339-340). Migration therefore seems to offer opportunities to change the diverse existential realities of our contemporary age and time, especially those that are debilitating.

Khalid Koser points that while the term migrant covers a wide range of people in a wide variety of situations, it is difficult to ascertain the number of migrant globally and to determine how long they have been abroad. Furthermore, he argues that knowing when a person become

a migrant as well as when they cease to be or change status is also of utmost importance (14). Nigeria's migrant literature is becoming increasingly significant because of its preoccupation with the complex issues of universal importance such as mobility, hybridity, transnationalism and in-betweenness. These writings demand critical consideration considering the representation of realities that seem to question globalization and other such attempts by Western cosmopolis at uniting the world. With growing African Diasporas, the implication and complex realities that attend this linger as significant subjects in contemporary African fiction. These narratives reconstruct life outside and inside Africa, the nuances of a complex existence as immigrants, exiles, refugees, and expatriates.

This paper examines cosmopolitan peregrination and the 'push and pull' factors that serve as the reason for the complex immigrant existence represented in Helon Habila's *Travellers*. It examines the realities of Africans oscillating between their homeland and diverse hostlands across Europe and America in Helon Habila's *Travellers* as a contemporary reality. The study which is premised on postcolonial literary theory and sociologist, Everett Spurgeon Lee's 'push-pull' migration theory argues that Habila's novel projects considerably the process of immigration, implicating 'push' and 'pull' factors in the refugee, asylum seeker and immigrant's persistent sense of dislocation, complex identity and belonging. The study identifies unstable socio-political climates that foster unrests, dictatorships, wars, and economic instability as push factors; while the stability of Western cosmopolitan cities remains the appeal for perhaps the fulfilment of fragile expectations. The study which adopts a descriptive approach, undertakes a critical and literary analysis of the primary data against the backdrop of information gleaned from secondary sources such as journals, books and the internet,

Helon Habila was born in northern Nigeria. He was educated in Nigeria, where he also worked as a lecturer and magazine editor before relocating abroad. Helon Habila has four published novels; *Waiting for an Angel* (2003), which won the Commonwealth Literature Prize in 2003 for the best novel by an African, *Measuring Time* (2007); *Oil on Water* (2010); *Travellers* (2019); and a non-fiction book, *Chibok Girls: Boko Haram kidnapping and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016) which explores Islamic militancy and the 2014 kidnap of 213 school girls in a state in Northern Nigeria. The recipient of many awards and grants, Helon Habila teaches creative writing at George Mason University, Virginia, USA.

The 'Push and Pull': Migrant *Raisons d'etre* and the Postcolonial Narrative

Everett Spurgeon Lee's 1966 comprehensive migration theory (also known as the 'push-pull' migration theory), highlights several factors that facilitate migrants' mobility from one location to another. Lee defines migration "broadly as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence. No restriction is placed upon the distance of the move or upon the voluntary or involuntary nature of the act, and no distinction is made between external and internal migration of such moves are vastly different" (49). He posits that the factors that could hold down or push out migrants from their place(s) of origin to new destinations could be categorized thus: (i) Factors associated with the place of origin, (ii) Factors associated with the place of destination, (iii) Intervening obstacles, and (iv) Personal factors (Lee 50).

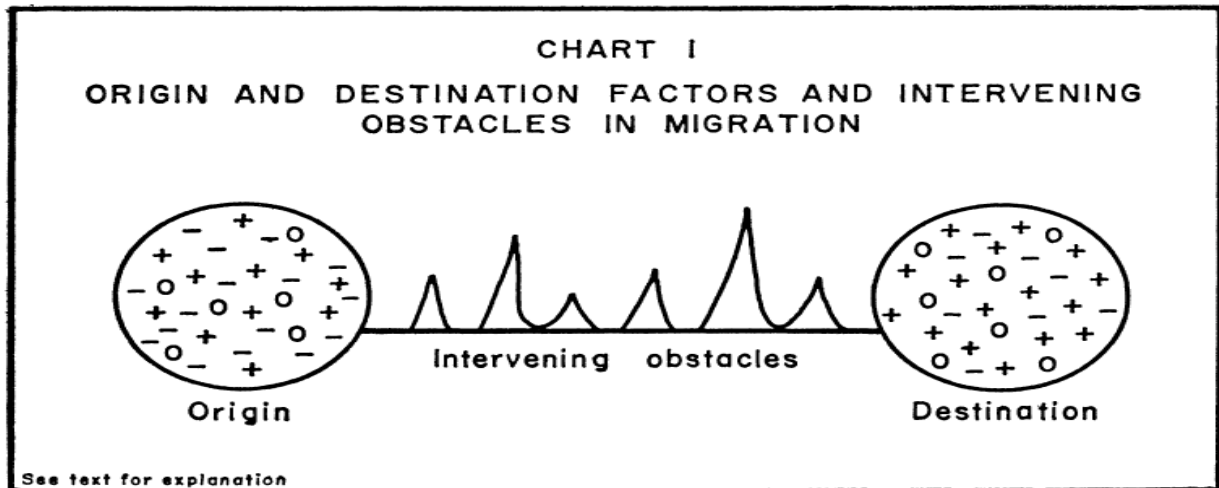


Diagram 1, from Everette Lee's "The Migration theory" (50), showing the diverse factors that enable migration.

Lee's diagram presents the subject of migration and the complexities that give rise to it and attend it. He insists that while migration may result from comparing the place of origin and destination, it usually does not influence the decision to move rather, the benefits of migrating which must be enough to overcome the inertia of relocating (50). Furthermore, Lee insists that "in every area there are countless factors which act to hold people within the area or attract people to it (+), and there are others which tend to repel them (-)" while other intending migrants respond indifferently to these factors (O). These are represented by the following signs respectively: +, - and O. (51). Thus, the pull factors are factors that propel a person to move to a new destination or hostland, while the push factors are factors that force people to move from an area or country (51).

With migration as a topical issue in former colonies, and literature, Fatemeh Pourjafari and Abdolali state that postcolonialism as a literary framework accommodates migrant literature aptly considering its ability to investigate migration, its corollaries and identify the complex realities that are involved both stylistically and thematically. Furthermore, they assert that since postcolonial theory examines marginal groups of society, interrogating migrant literatures remains readily implied in its focus. All these account for this study's preference for interrogating the realities represented in the selected novel against the backdrop of postcolonial literary theory.

Bill Ashcroft *et al* use the term "post-colonial" "to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2), considering the lingering impact of colonisation: the socio-cultural, political and economic hegemonies that Europe and the Western world still exerts even after the period of imperial aggression. Ashcroft *et al* inextricably convey literary reactions during and after colonisation, and the significance of the entire imperial enterprise on present-day literatures. Postcolonial literature and theory is characterized by a rather robust discourse owing to the multidisciplinary nature of postcolonial theory and the versatility of its proponents who

have contributed thoughts from diverse disciplinary perspectives. The contributions of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin through their seminal text, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and others have shaped postcolonial studies and discourse.

Ashcroft *et al* state that the postcolonial theory as a literary approach evaluates the impact and influence of the colonial enterprise on previously colonised people and the now subversive reactions of these post-colonies to the hegemonies of the super powers even in present times. Lois Tyson states that, “postcolonial criticism is both a subject matter and a theoretical framework” (418). As a subject matter, postcolonial criticism pays critical attention to literature written by colonised people and cultures as a reaction to colonial intrusion up till date; while postcolonial criticism as a framework is preoccupied with unearthing and understanding the political, social, cultural and psychological strategies of the colonialist and the anti-colonialist (Tyson 418).

Postcolonial theory is discursive in practice, functioning through the reading and analyses of postcolonial texts interrogating the complex process of displacement, culture, language, identity, belonging, history and societal life in relation to previously colonised people. Till Kinzel asserts that in doing this, postcolonial literary theory tends to project “a whole range of non-literary contexts in their interpretations of literary works” (113). This paper relates significantly with Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s assertion

Post-colonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. None of these is ‘essentially’ post-colonial, but together they form the complex fabric of the field (2).

Thus, postcolonial literary theory as a critical framework investigates the implications of colonial strategies and position and postcolonial literary response to these. It does this in relation to the integral aspects of existence of colonised people such as culture, language, history and other experiences that are conveyed without intervention. The examination of postcolonial literatures is therefore preoccupied with probing concerns of language, hegemony, crises of identity, dislocation, place and displacement which remain major considerations in the colonised people (Ashcroft *et al* 3). Maximillian Feldner avers that “postcolonial literature is also expected to express an interest in issues pertaining to aspects of mobility, migration and diaspora, which is not surprising, as migration and diaspora present excellent sites for rendering literary discussions of cultural difference and marginality” (27). In doing this, he argues that the postcolonial writer not only engages with marginality but related subjects that resonate appreciably with concepts such as hybridity and multi- or transculturalism, significant concerns and ideas within the framework of the postcolonial theory (27).

The postcolonial discourse and Lee’s migration theory, converge by critically accounting for migrant’s experiences, the marginality of his/her position and status, the reality of a dislocated sense of self, place and displacement created by the choice of migration and the

process of settlement in new destinations. Thus, while the migrant's difference may be exploited, this status gives voice to, and centralises the migrant's "pervasive concern with the myths of identity", which Bill Ashcroft *et al* state is a common feature of post-colonial literatures in English. (9). Thus, as Feldner articulates, "Postcolonial discourses have imbued marginality and cultural difference with positive value" (27); with this, migrant narratives and the representation of realities from transnational relations have been centralised for interrogation in postcolonial discourse and studies. Mardorossian posits that in migrant literature, the realities of migrant spaces are communicated significantly thus:

the world inhabited by the characters is no longer conceptualized as "there." Because of her displacement, the migrant's identity undergo shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in her ambivalence towards both her old and new existence. She can no longer simply or nostalgically remember the past as a fixed and comforting anchor in her life, since its contours move with the present rather than in opposition to it. Her identity is no longer to do with being but with becoming. (16)

This experience of uncertainty and transformation then that becomes part of the migrant character's ever-changing life and identity in literature, Søren Frank avers attests to how migrants try to cope with migration in different ways. He insists that these experiences differ from migrant to migrant, and thus could be seen as being sometimes "destructive, agonizing, and painful" and at other times "productive, fascinating, and appealing", both of which work towards projecting a dynamic character, transformed by the oscillations of the different spaces the migrant occupies and engages (18-19).

Cosmopolitan Peregrination in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

Helon Habila's *Travellers* narrates diverse experiences of migrants crisscrossing western metropolises in search of expectations that are sometimes fleeting. The novel, which is structured like an anthology of stories, has six sections conveying the diverse experiences of people of different nations predominantly in Africa, and statuses. The connection of these stories is established by Habila's unnamed Nigerian protagonist, a PhD student who has lived in America for a number of years and now sees America as 'home'. Though the protagonist is nameless, he is significant in conveying the obscure status of migrants across the globe whose names and personal identities are insignificant because of their origin, race and the status they have in their host and new communities in world centres.

Habila's protagonist at the beginning of the narrative is a privileged migrant. He is a graduate student, married to an American, which makes him dislocated from home, Nigeria as he sojourns in America. He acknowledges that his relationship and marriage to an American woman not only severs his relationship with his family but homeland. Lethargic about the marriage, the protagonist staggers the relationship for three years as he co-habits with Gina, his then girlfriend. He confesses thus, "it 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 and exit plan" (Habila 11). This unstable marriage, however, fosters not only

his peregrination in the New World and Europe but projects the realities and inconsistencies that are associated with living in hostlands as a migrant.

The protagonist's wife, Gina who is an artist wins the prestigious Berlin Zimmer Fellowship for the Arts. She suggests that they go together to Berlin, where she has been awarded the arts fellowship, but he has his doubts: "I knew every departure is a death, every return a rebirth. Most changes happen unplanned, and they always leave a scar. (Habla 12)". Although the protagonist has his concerns, this migration process triggers many more experiences and exposes him to a plethora of experiences that define the lives of contemporary travellers such as migrants, exiles, expatriates, refugees and asylum seekers in world centres in the 21st century. While Gina's fellowship serves as the significant pull out of America, in Berlin, the protagonist is exposed to a community of African migrants with these different statuses and begins to assess their statuses and his as African migrants in Europe. The migrants he encounters all have stories that convince him that the dynamics of migration for black people and cosmopolitans is marked by complexities that deny their existence as global citizens and define them through the lens of marginality as some 'Other'; thus, there is a continuous need to find a 'home' elsewhere. Perhaps, this is what triggers the continuous mobility/travelling of these characters who remain restless citizens of European cosmopolis.

During his early days in Berlin, after he arrives with Gina for her fellowship, the protagonist is drawn to a group of young people of African descent, who live in an abandoned church building where "Most of the doors and windows were gone" (Habla 14) and are regular targets for police raids and maltreatment. They however seem to understand their marginality in Europe better because of the difficulties and denigration that characterises their daily sojourn in Europe. While the protagonist does not yet understand this, each migrant he meets has an unpleasant story of survival in Africa and across Europe, coupled with the realities associated with being black and alien thus, making their oscillating a continuous experience. When these experiences serve as the catalyst for the migrant protest he witnesses in Berlin, the protagonist remains indecisive about his relationship with his African associations until Mark is arrested by the police for his involvement in the protest. Mark, who is from Malawi is out of status as a student in Berlin and is going to face deportation because of this. His friends as well as the protagonist come together to help secure his release and stay in Europe still. With this experience, Mark expresses his sense of alienation when he states that even in Berlin, he missed Berlin (Habla 42). This experience draws the protagonist into a completely new reality that exposes him to possibilities that could also define his existence also in Europe. Pourjafari and Vahidpour succinctly point that migrant literature seems to give a detailed description of the journey from homeland to the new land, with the diverse experiences of the flight of migrants, the terror and humiliation that they encounter when seeking refuge in hostlands (689).

Habila's narrative makes it clear that push forces that seem to make the peregrination of these migrants a continuous and inevitable process suppress the pull to Europe for many. Thus, migrating from Libya to Berlin because of war and violence, Manu and his family flee their home and are displaced at sea. Manu's separation from his wife and son as a result of the accident at sea, an illegal route gets him to Greece where he lives with the status of an illegal migrant with all the attending implications. Manu is restless while in "Greece where he spent last season picking fruit, sleeping on hard floors, escaping the police and the neo-Nazis, and

making sure Rachida was safe” (Habila 75). Still on the move, Manu who leaves home a qualified medical doctor ends up serving as a doorman and bouncer in Berlin because he is an illegal migrant without the necessary documents. For him and other migrants like him, migration therefore signals the end of his professional identity, career and dreams as he sojourns Europe in search of a safe and meaningful existence in contemporary times.

Karim is another restless cosmopolitan who criss-crosses continents in search of peace, safety, jobs and an accessible healthcare system for his family. Although a successful trader in Somalia, Karim flees with his family from war-torn and violent Somalia where his ten-year old daughter would have been forcefully married off to a brutal warlord. These horrid realities push Karim into the unknown as he searches for a new existence. He describes this initial migration process thus: “the beginning of our life on the road” (Habila 172). From Somalia, he migrates to poor Yemen, with insufficient opportunities. When he cannot find a job to sustain his family, he moves to Syria and when Syria is impacted by violence, he moves to Turkey, Bulgaria and other parts of Europe where he hopes against all odds that his son’s bad leg can receive medical attention. He tells the protagonist, “we have been to many countries, but now we live in Germany” (Habila 166). Karim’s peregrination leaves his sons, Mahmoud and Fadel with the knowledge of several languages but also, memories of human right abuse, racial discrimination, hunger, hostility and danger. Outside Somalia, several factors keep pushing Karim and his boys from one nation to another. A resolute Karim tells the protagonist:

They tell me the only place you can get help is in Europe, Germany or France. I look at my son who all his life wants to play football and I promise myself that I will bring him to Germany or France as long as I am alive (176)

Habila seems to suggest from his characters’ restless oscillations that once migration is initiated, the process may continue until the migrant comes to a place he can call ‘home’, a place that affords him/her some sense of economic, social and physical security.

The protagonist’s legal migrant status it would seem affords him some confidence as he travels across Europe and America in search of a more meaningful existence. This shields him from the realities associated with being an exile, refugee, asylum seeker and an illegal migrant without documents while he meets and interacts with migrants fleeing Africa and other part of the world in search of a better life, adventure, love and sometimes, existential answers. However, in the course of the narrative when the tables turn and the protagonist loses his bag, passport and travel documents, Habila centralises him as an ‘illegal’ migrant; this acquaints the protagonist with the experience of the ‘Others’ who migrate precariously across Europe. Held with illegal migrants and refugees, even the US consulate in Palermo say they cannot help him since he has insufficient documents to prove his status. The narrator feels the trauma and psychological torture migrants go through in deportation camps, prisons and the borders of European countries as they wait in hope that one day they will be granted asylum, leave to stay, or permission to enter Europe, perhaps unite with “fortunate” family members and friends. The protagonist, like other characters who have no immediate contacts, who cannot unite with family nor friends, lives destitute in camps with illegal migrants until he has proofs that validates his ideal status. With this experience, he becomes familiar with the pain of separation,

as he witnesses first-hand despondent migrants committing suicide by starving, hanging, stabbing and drowning themselves (Habla 203).

These experiences culminate in the protagonist's deportation to Nigeria alongside over a hundred deportees from Tunisia to Lagos. When he seems to recover his health, he travels to America again with the financial support of his embarrassed family:

Where is your American wife? My mother asked me when I got home...I could hear the shame in her voice, her son who had gone to America had returned poorer and thinner than he had let. I left as soon as I recovered my health. My father cleared his bank account and gave it all to me... (247).

Predictably, this peregrination continues, a fate similar to that of other travelling characters in the narrative because of the expectations that are associated with the entire process. With this, Habla implicates and seems to condemn the Home office cruel and inhumane immigration policies that seems to deliberately create hostile environments for immigrants who must keep migrating until a 'home' or at least a sense of 'home' is established elsewhere.

Conclusion

Migration remains a significant preoccupation in contemporary African literature; this accounts for the fixation of Africa's migrant writers with the subject. Accordingly, Helon Habla engages the complexities associated with existing across international borders as an immigrant asylum seeker, refugee, legal / illegal migrant and more in contemporary times in his novel. This, he articulates alongside the 'push' and 'pull' factors that serve as determining realities which make these peregrinations across European and Western spaces seemingly endless irrespective of the negative corollaries. The paper concludes that while the stability of Western cosmopolitan cities remains the appeal for perhaps the fulfilment of fragile expectations of many African immigrants, the politics that cultivates cosmopolitan peregrinations and complex immigrant existence across national borders and international borders remains unfavourable for Africans, more so illegal immigrants who are not readily considered citizens of these cosmopolitan spaces; thus, Habla unmasks the reality of cruel policies, characters who embark on endless journeys in search of *Eldorado* and a place to call 'home'.

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