FROM DREAMS TO DESPAIR: THE HARSH REALITY OF AFRICAN MIGRATION AND THE RISE OF PROSTITUTION IN TWO AFRICAN NOVELS

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Abstract

Research Problem: *Poverty and political ineptitudes have been discovered to be the primordial causes of African migration to Europe and other countries of the world, while despair and disillusionment have been the post-migration realities as depicted in two African Diasporic narratives. Previous scholarly and critical engagements on African migration narratives have focused tremendously on issues of cultural hybridity, cultural loss, loss of identity, nostalgia and family disintegration, however, little or no attention has been paid to the portrayal of poverty and desperation as the migrant's driving force, and the attendants disenchantment and disappointment that orchestrate the rise of prostitution in the lives of female African migrants. This will be the thrust of this paper.*

Methods Theory: *The data is sourced from two African novels:NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names and Chika Unigwe'sOn Black Sisters' Street. These texts are subjected to critical textual analysis, using Andre Gunder Frank's model of Dependency Theory as the theoretical framework. The essence of the Dependency Theory is to provide the distinction between the First and Third World countries; it provides also valuable reasons why Africans should not exhibit over-reliance on the First World countries for socio-economic survival.*

Results:*It is discovered that poverty orchestrated by political bad leadership makes young Africans to see migration as the only potential avenue for socio-economic survival. Italso revealed that the euphoric dreams of the African migrants are shattered due to the harsh realities in the host communities. It is discovered that the African migrants become modern slaves and demeaning objects of commercial sex.*

Conclusion:*African migration therefore is inimical to the female African migrants' well-being, and injurious to African society and culture.*

Introduction

Dreams will be considered in this paper as individual's desires, wishes and aspirations; the pleasant height or position or condition that an individual is striving profoundly to attain in future. Once a dream is becoming blurred in a particular location, migration to another place may become imperative.

Migration is a complex and risk-taking endeavor, it is often shaped by many factors such as poverty, unpleasant socio-political policies, political ineptitudes to mention but a few. Clarisse (2016) sees migration as a trend of displacement and movement made by individuals with the hope to find more personal convenience or improve their material or social conditions. This view is corroborated byUrbanski (2022) that conceives migration as a shrewd decision by individuals to benefit from opportunities not sufficient in their homeland. It is glaring that migration involves leaving a known environment for the unknown or strange environment for the purpose of a perceived betterment. While factors that induce it are multifarious, some of them include the push and pull factors, such as political instability, civil conflict, insecurity, a lack of job opportunities, economic stability in the host community and better opportunities (Fernie and Pitkethly, 17). While considering the current high waves of migration in Africa, Kehinde (2010) asserts that the increase in the wave is grossly due to the fact that African environment is not capable of offering its citizenry the opportunity for a meaningful existence and this accounts for the degree of voluntariness to migrate to foreign lands (63). Kehinde anchors his argument on the widespread of poverty in Africa, especially Nigeria where people are compelled to make choices under the pressure of the absence of basic amenities, security and probable sources of livelihood. This highlights one of the thrusts of this paper that migration in Africa is induced by poverty, because African migrants are compelled by hardship to search for a better life elsewhere.

From time immemorial, migration has existed; Africa has particularly experienced several historical waves of migration from the era of slave trade to colonialism. It has become an overwhelming global issue and scholarship in recent time as writers and critics have yielded their artistic and scholarly works to thematic preoccupations such as racism, cultural identity crisis, cultural hybridity and other stereotypes caused by migration. African writers have risen to the occasion as they increasingly show more profound concern and empathy for the plights, and unpleasant emotional and traumatic experiences of African migrants in their host communities in their fictional engagements. This seemingly new focus in African literature is referred to as 'Migration Literature'.

According to Clarisse (2016), Migration Literature is the literature that is mostly produced by migrants depicting their or others' experiences and encounters with the new culture and tradition of the host nation. These experiences and encounters are cultural, emotional, economic and social. The worksinclude all literary works that are produced in a time of migration or that can be said to reflect on migration. In most of African migration literary works, the authors often depict the desperate exodus of migrants whose dreams of better living and economic conditions are shattered or collapsed on the altar of despair, disillusionment, depression, cultural identity and lonelinessas they discover that their dreams' destination is in reality far away from what they had earlier imagined.Ugwanyi (2024) lays

credence to the depiction of African migration writers as he posits that migration in Africa is necessitated by the survival conditions of nationals who perceive that moving from one geographical unit to another would change their socio-economic milieu; whereas this leads to the migrants attempt to construct a home away from home which usually leads to unpalatable exilic experiences. Matthew (2018) corroborates Ugwanyi as he sums up the prevalent cultural confusion and crisis of African migrants as 'motif of rootlessness', and the need to survive in new landscapes and the dread of displacement because the migrants flee for better lease of life and security only to be confronted with rejection in a place of assumed solace (102).

It is very succinct to bring to the fore the humiliation, mental oppression and moral degradation meted out on female African migrants who are deceived into commercial sex work as a result of the rampant poverty at home and perhaps the deceit from their traffickers who have over exaggerated the grandeurs and life in foreign country. Ibanga (2019) describes this ignominious act as a projection of the nuance and sensibility of a typical poverty motivated sex work and human trafficking (269). This paper will align with the views of scholars and critics above, as it will furtherelucidate contextually the havocs homegrown poverty and bad governance have done to the lives of African migrants in their host communities.

Previous scholarly engagements on African migration have condemned this untoward and unpalatable scenario, some make an appalling plea that the migrants should return to salvage the homegrown economy and opportunity. However, Martina (2019) lamentably depicts the effects of African migration; he specifically emphasizes issue of brain drain that has visited African citadels of learning where gifted and talented intellectuals have left home for Europe. Similarly,Bello and Olutola (2020) have concentrated on the causes, agents and impacts of illegal migration of Africans to the other worlds; they condemn the illegal and gruesome activities of smugglers, human traffickers and travel agencies regarding them as the banes of development in Africa.In another dimension, Kabir (2022) embraces the cultural hybridity that emerges in the life of African migrants.Osanyemi (2023) emphatically condemns the worrisome high rate of African youth migration and the racial discrimination meted out on the African migrants, he sees it as a dehumanizing expedition. In congruous to this, Papadopoulos (2021) emphasizes human trafficking and sexual exploitation of African female migrant.

Research Problem

To this end, this paper seeks to explore the foregoing concerns, by paying closer attention to how the fanciful dreams of African migrants for better living conditions become shattered, the exploration of harsh reality and the rise of African female prostitution orchestrated by the fear of despair and returning home without economic uplift.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this paper shall be:

- To examine factors responsible for the shattering of African migrants' dreams and aspirations in the primary texts.
- To examine how the shattered dreams and aspirations later become the harbinger of prostitution in the characterisation of the major characters in the primary texts.

Methodology

The main focus of the study is to explore how homegrown poverty and bad governance have served as the propelling fulcrum that pushes promising African migrants away from home, how their dreams for better living conditions become a mirage and how African female migrants settle for prostitution in order to survival economically. NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Chika Unigwe's*On Black Sisters Street*will serve as the data and primary texts for the study. These data will be subjected to critical textual analysis in both content and form. Inspirations are drawn from Andre Gunder Frank's model of Dependency Theory, it will serve as the theoretical framework and also undergird the analysis. The essence of the Dependency Theory is to provide the distinction between the First and Third World countries. This distinction is further expatiated by Walter Rodney who posits that the present economic retardation experienced by the Third countries in the world, especially Africa, was deliberately orchestrated by the imperialist system of European superpowers to drain African wealth and talents to make it impossible for the African countries to develop their resources (Frank 27). This theory provides valuable reasons why Africans should not exhibit over-reliance on the First World countries for socio-economic survival, it further reveals in this study the underlying factors that induce people's vulnerability to migration and sexual exploitation,

Poverty, Dreams, Desperations and African Migrants

Before textual engagement, it will be pertinent tosituate the primary texts. The novel, *We Need New Names* tells a pathetic story of a young African girl, Darling. She lives in squalor with her friends in a Shanty Area of Zimbabwe. Ironically, the Shanty Area where she lives with her friends and parent is called Paradise. As a street girl in her teenage, she has received the pangs and pains of poverty orchestrated by the ineptitude of the government of her country. She navigates life in her homeland and later in America. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part gives an account of her poor living condition as a street girl with her friends as she is faced with poverty, political instability, political ineptitude and violence. The second part provides Darling's journey and life in America where she grapples with cultural adjustment, identity and the pursuit of good dreams. She lives with her aunt in Michigan where she couldn't cope with American reality of immigration, menial work, cultural barriers, and the inability to return home. Finally, she feels like a prisoner in her new life.

On Black Sisters Street is about four African women, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, they are faced with the icy hands of poverty in Africa and they decide to leave their country through Dele, an agent or sex trafficker. The story centers onSisi, a young Nigerian who through migration has escaped her poverty-stricken past and becomes involved in prostitution as she navigates her new reality, she forms bonds with the other women, each dealing with their own traumas and secrets.Sisi and her friends are caught in the web of despair and dilemma as their quest for better living condition in Belgium dwindles as a result of cultural hybridity, alienation and identity crisis.

Poverty is a major factor that has been propelling mass migration of Africans through regularand irregular means in search for survival and greener pastures. To get to Europe and other countries of the world is the utmost dream of young Africans because of the poignant experiences of poverty and bad governance in their countries. In the novel, *We Need New*

Names, the author aptly describes poverty that the protagonist faces as the major drive for her dream to leave her homeland. According to the novel, Darling and her friends are always dressed in dirty and torn clothes constantly awaiting gifts of clothing and food from non-governmental organizations, the area they live is called Paradise, whereas they live in "kaka toilet" (a slum), and their shack is described as "tin" with mattress made of plastics and chicken's and duck's feathers and old pieces of cloth and all sorts of things (Bulawayo 121). This description is unfathomably depressing and unbefitting for healthy living. Proper education which will provide hope for a positive change is no longer attainable as the characters are left with no choice than to stop schooling. Darling and her friends engage in streetism as hunger prompts them to leave Paradise for Budapest to steal guavas to fill up their stomachs, just as lack of proper housing, education, clothing and other material comforts prompts them to dream of escape from the "tatters" (Bulawayo 41).

From the street's unpalatable experiences, the characters in the novel become disenchanted with their homeland and begin to fantasize escape from poverty through migration. Thus, they become obsessed with migration as the only solace from poverty. Darling and her friend embrace migration with hopes of better living; Sbho says, "I'm going to marry a rich man from Budapest. He will take me away from Paradise" (29). Bastard, (another friend of Darling) says, "I'm blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I'll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest" (Bulawayo 30). Darling declares, "I'm going to America to live with my aunt,Fostalina" (Bulawayo 32). It is succinctly obvious in the text that poverty has created a kind of desperation in the mindset of the characters to embrace migration as the only potentially liberating factor that instantly places some of the characters in a position of superiority over others who have no hope of escape.

The craving to subdue poverty has birthed a desperation and hope that it seems that nothing can hinder the dreams of young African migrants ably represented in the protagonist, Darling. Even the unfavorable and cold weather in Michigan cannot deprive her of the escape from homeland poverty. She expresses her firm resolve to stay in America in spite of the snow and the attendant cold simply because, she is sure, if she returns home, she will not have enough money and food to feed at home (Bulawayo 289). She remembers her past at home when people would "pour out onto the street and run like they were dying, chasing after trucks loaded with mealie-meal, sugar, cooking oil, bread, soap, and just about anything. In America here, there is food to eat, all types and types of food" (Bulawayo 411).

Similarly, Unigwe gives a vivid description of poverty in *On Black Sisters' Street* that characterized Africa, especially Nigeria where the author paints a gory picture of impoverishment through a poor character, a woman at the bus station in Enugu carrying a baby, looking absolutely unkempt and begging for food from the 'dead bodies' on the road who are 'homeless people murdered by those who needed them to make money' (Unigwe 184). The four female migrants could be referred to as impoverished strivers who are compelled by the pressure of the homeland poverty and the bait of quick acquisition of material wealth from their pimp (trafficker) as soon as they are out of African shore. They become desperateand determined to leave their country, not minding the risk of travelling through illegal and irregular means. Efe, one of the migrants responds to a warning for her to be cautious in her bid to leave the country:

"If I wan' go abroad, Oga Dele? Anybody dey ask pikin if de pikin wan' sweet?" who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition, and people trying to fulfill that ambition. Was it not just the week before that the cyclist whose okada she had boarded told her of the Nigerian man who died at the airport in some abroad country he could not pronounce because the bags of cocaine he swallowed had burst in his stomach?... People knew the risks and people took them, because the destination was worth it. What was it the song said? Nigeria jagajaga.Everytin' scatter scatter. Nobody wanted to stay back unless they had pots of money to survive the country. People like Titus and Dele. (Unigwe 66)

This character has an undeterred craving for migration and she is determined to vehemently crush anything that may obstruct her aspiration and desire.Unigwe's female characters in the novel are presented as 'desperados' who want to go to Europe, despite the fact that they are going there as sex objects. Dele, their pimp and trafficker remarks:

All my gals, I treat good. I dey tell dem before demcomot. I deydey straight wit dem. Me, I be good man. I just dey try to help poor gals. Yes, I know. Na good worker we lose but gals full boku for Lagos. I get three lined up. Latest next week, dem visa go ready. (Unigwe 221)

In tandem with the above scenarios of poverty and desperation as the primordial pivots that lubricate the wheel of migration of Africans to Europe, the above excerpt has vividly exposed the high level of vulnerability and gullibility of African migrants whose sole aim of leaving their country is anchored on materialism. But their dreams and expectations of wealth acquisition become the exact oppositeas reality dawns on them in Europe. Darling, the protagonist of Bulawayo's novel regrettably narrates their ordeal:

And when we got to America we took our dreams, looked at them tenderly as if they were newly born children, and put them away: we would not be pursuing them. We would never be the things we had wanted to be … We knew we did not have the money for school to begin with … instead of going to school, we worked … we dropped our heads because we were no longer people: we were now illegals. Our extended families sent requests and we worked like donkeys, worked like slaves, worked like madmen. When we hesitated, they said. You are in America where everybody has money, we see it all on TV, please don't deny us. (Bulawayo 463-464)

The African migrants are not living a palatable and pleasant life in Europe. Whenever they come home or send message, their excessive and intentional showiness make them too proud to tell people at home the truth and reality in Europe, therefore, the people at home or the intending migrants have little idea about their joblessness, menial jobs, homelessness, prostitution and drug pushing they involve in to survive. These people at home only get to pay for their ignorance after crossing the border.

The Rise of Prostitution among African Migrants

As a response to a question of what motivates Chika Unigwe to write the novel, *On Black Sisters' Street* and about illegal Nigerian migrants, and by extension African sex workers, in an interview with DariaTunca, she says:

After I moved to Belgium, I made a journey by train from the north of the country to Brussels, and I remember passing through Brussels North and seeing all the prostitutes in the display windows. It struck me that here was

a place where sex was not only very openly talked about but was also openly up for sale. That was one of the first cultural shocks. And when I realized that many of the African prostitution in Antwerp were from Nigeria, I became really curious. On Black Sisters' Street was my way of answering all the questions I had. It was a book I wrote to satisfy my own curiosity. (4)

It is imperative to note that, culturally, Africans view prostitution as an immoral and sacrilegious act, and any perpetrator of this act is seen as an outcast and it will attract public curiosity. Thus, Unigwe's novel in this paper does not only discuss the growing group of African migrants in Belgium but it also charts the accounts of the abysmal rise of sex trafficking and prostitution among African ladies who pride themselves as flamboyant migrants in their relationship with their home people.

Two categories of prostitution will be analyzed in this work. The first category constitutes the female young African migrants, who against their inner desires, are forced to subject their bodies to sex exploiters for self-sustenance and materialism. The second is made up of African young women with perhaps, a history of drug and alcohol dependencies, poverty and other vulnerabilities who are easily lured by traffickers into prostitution, the women in this category have the foreknowledge that they are migrating to engage in commercial sex works, so, they are self-willed prostitutes. Bulawayo's characters in *We Need New Names* belong to the first category, Darling and her co-migrants experience disappointment and disillusionment in their host communities as a result of a failure to achieve their set goals and dreams. Some of them become victim of sex abuse and prostitution because they are smitten by materialistic urges and longings. In the novel, *We Need New Names*, Aunt Fostalina is urged by her pressing need for money to meet the incessant demands from home; she unwillingly becomes intimate with her rich white boss, Eliot. Darling, her niece comments:

Eliot just appeared in the living room wearing these white boxers with red kisses, hairy stomach spilling all over the place, his thing sticking out against his boxers. He took me by surprise and Iscreamed. A little while later, AuntFostalina rushed in to see what was happening, wrapped in her favorite wrap cloth, the one with the fading flags of our country. (Bulawayo 532)

Fostalina has been driven by a combination of disenchantment, frustration and desperation as she succumbs her body to sex exploiter for the sake of materialism. This scene is very symbolic because after the unwilling sexual encounter, she wraps her body with the fading Zimbabwean flag. Here is a woman that has just be sexually abused by her a privileged white boss. This symbolizes modern and feminine colonization of Africa and African woman respectively by the principal powers in Europe and imperialism which lead to the exploitation of African resources in one hand, and sexual exploitation of African woman who has been cowed by the famished resources in her home country in the other hand. This has shown that home grown poverty and financial urges are succinct factors that trigger off the rise of prostitution among female African migrants.

Unigwe's*On Black Sisters' Street* depicts self-willed prostitution, who are desperate young female migrants with strong affinity with the derogatory axiom that a ladies must use sex to rule her world. Unigwe, the author, presents female African migrants who are impoverished strivers who are willing to use the trump card that God has wedged in between their thighs to get what they want. This shows that the women

in the novel are lacking something and it is the urge to fill this vacuum that motivates their self-willed prostitution. They consider prostitution as the only escape route from poverty, they have been lobotomized by the pangs of poverty orchestrated by the government's indifference to opt for sex work with pride. With no other horizon, these characters express strong desperation to migrate to Europe, despite the fact that they know they are going there as professional sex workers.

However, their dreams of becoming rich through prostitution are punctured as reality in host communities dawns on them. Their traffickers are very hostile and profit conscious; the young female migrants are forced to undertake stringent agreements that are very sinister to their existence. Sisi, one of the migrants and by extension, all the migrants in the novel, experiences unpalatable tussle with her Madam, the trafficker. The narrator comments:

As if she were trying to size her up- a commodity for sale, a piece of choice meat, a slab of meat at the local abattoir. "Now you belong to me …until you have paid up every single kobo … every single cent of what you owe us, you shall not have your passport back … All you need to know is that you a persona non grata in this country. And you do not exist. Not here. (Unigwe 139)

From the above excerpt, the hopes of the migrants are dashed because every proceed from their commercial sex business goes to the trafficker without complaint. To free themselves from this shackle, it means more white men must crush them because more men, means more money to survive the stringent financial agreement. Thus, the initial euphoria of better living condition in Europe has become a nightmare. This kind of disenchantment is further heightened as Madam spells out other conditions:

My dear Sisi, it's not your place to ask questions here. You just do as you are told, and you'll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen… Silence and total obedience. That's the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard. (Unigwe 95)

Dovetailing from Madam's acrimonious signal, the female African migrants become modern slaves and this marks the birth of their entrapment as they are forced to live at the mercy of their traffickers. Thus, prostitution begins to rise with the proceed for their traffickers. In the midst of this mental and physical imbroglio, there may be a rethink that living at home is far better than slavery and entrapment abroad as Sisi concludes:

This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else.Anotherbody. Not mine … This is a dream. But I need the money. I can't do this. The money. Return to Lagos? Can't.won't. (Unigwe 160)

The female African migrants are vividly disappointed and absolutely discontented with how their lives have turned out to be in Europe. They become commodities openly displayed in a glass almost naked for white men to see and consume sexually. Sisi finds this demeaning and condescending to her perceived personality as a university graduate. Her disappointment can be adduced to a loss of social status as a university graduate, the stigma of being a failure at home and also a failure in Europe. The author captures the agony in her mind:

Regrets assailed her day in, day out. She smiled but behind that smile, her regret grew bigger and bigger, its shadow casting a pall over her. She began to wish she had never left home, ruing the day she met Dele. Why, oh why, had

she gone to his office? Why had she been taking in by his promises of wealth and glamour and happiness that knew no bounds? (Unigwe 187)

The mismatch between pre-migration life expectations and post-migration realities has affected the mental health and stability of the migrants. It has turned dreams to despairs and it has turned ignorant young female African migrants to residents of brothels in Europe.

Conclusion

This study has examined the portrayal of African migration crises in two African Diasporic narratives and it has justified the claim that migration in post-independence African nations is largely triggered by the socio-economic problems of poverty, unemployment, political ineptitudes and the false imagination of the West by Africans. These socio-economic upheavals have rendered Africa loathsome to many of her people who are driven by dreams, desperations and despairs to other places they perceive as a safe haven.

Through the immense contributions of African writers like NoViolet Bulawayo and Chika Unigwe to the trending issue of mass migration of African youths, the factors instigating migrant's choice have been elucidated as political, socio-economic and psychological. The effects, this trend has on the migrants have been very inimical to their existence as human beings, very injurious to African continent as it portends great damage to African culture, economy and growth. Considering these situations, it appears difficult and unreasonable to posit that the gains African migrants may eventually acquire worth the physical, psychological and social loss that accompany their migration.

With visionary leadership, provision of infrastructural facilities and job creation, Africa can rise from current state of underdevelopment and become a place of pride to her people. Thus, African migration and its attendant crises will be reduced drastically.

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