

## **ACCULTURATION AND AFRICAN IDENTITY IN IMBOLO MBUE'S BEHOLD THE DREAMERS.**

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### **Abstract**

*Migration is an age-long activity. Different people migrate for different reasons ranging from voluntary emigration to forced exile. With its multifaceted nature, some dreams are realized while others remain elusive. However, the effects of migration on people's identity and culture have developed into intriguing questions which occupy a top shelf in the minds and works of contemporary researchers and literary writers. Adichie in her *Americanah*, Unigwe in her *On Black Sister's Street*, Mabanckou in his *Blue White Red* have ostensibly exposed the identity crises, the rejection/deportation and the cultural bereavement which migrants face as they struggle to find their feet in their supposedly new 'homes'. Using Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the dreamers*, this paper examines the extent to which the Jonga family strives to realize their dreams and at the same time maintain her African identity in their dream country - the American society. An expository cum hermeneutic approaches are employed to decry the protagonist's unspoken agonies without undermining the optimism that spiced this epic tale. It concludes that while a break from poverty could be a primary reason for emigration, preservation of her identity would make an average African migrant return to her roots.*

**Key words:** Migration, Acculturation, Identity, Dream, Cultural bereavement.

### **Introduction**

Apart from the people whose social life is nomadic in nature, movement from one place to another has been an intrinsic part of human history. Certain authors define migration as "the process of going from one country, region or place of residence to settle in another." (Bhugra and Becker). The above statement aptly captures the act of migration and this paper adopts it as a working tool for this research. Some people migrate out of sheer curiosity and adventure while others do same because they had to. The aftermath of these movements has left a bitter-sweet experience on the memory of human history. In the process of these movements, certain dreams are achieved while others remain elusive. It was in the process of migration that Christopher Columbus discovered the new world

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which has existed right from the origin of time. No thanks to migration and the desire to develop the New world, the most obnoxious trade (slave trade) in human history sparked off. Ever since the Afro-european contact, migration and its consequences have been at the center of African history and literature.

Colonialism as we know it, is one the consequences of migration. It is arguably true that “Modern African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism.” (Gikandi 54) The precolonial African literature focused on the social and cultural life of the people, but the literature of the colonial era was largely imbued with the immigration of the whites and the positive and negative effects of their presence on the African culture and identity. Thus “writers concerned with the nature of African society could not avoid the trauma and drama that accompanied the imposition of European rule on the continent.” (Gikandi 55) The foisting of their educational system, language and religious values are some of the by-products of colonialism; a lamentable encounter emanating from migration. In the postcolonial African literature, one encounters an unsatisfied and discombobulated continent. Her rich cultural heritage struggles to coexist with the alien values, hence originality is lost in the process, history is distorted, wealth remains in few hands, government is tyrannic or authoritative under the guise of democracy, poverty becomes the lot of many, tribal/civil war thrive, genocide rears its ugly head, confusion, anarchy and suffering reign. The co-habitation is achieved but the foreign culture seem to dominate the traditional values.

In this situation, one encounters another form of migration: Young, energetic and ambitious Africans emigrate to Europe and America. They relocate for different reasons ranging from political, socioeconomic, educational to religious factors. Some remain in the foreign land. They have to contend with racism, stigmatization, acculturation, lost of identity and other untold mental anguish but enjoy a much more organized system of government and education. Only a handful accomplish their dreams but not without going through thorns and brambles. Imbolo Mbue’s protagonist falls into this category of migrants. On the day Jende Jonga got his visa to America he exclaimed:

Who traveled to America only to return to a future of othingness in Cameroon after three months? Not young men like him, not people facing a future of poverty and despondency in their own country. No, people like him did not visit America. They got there and stayed there until they could return home as conquerors-as green card-or American

passport-bearing conquerors with pockets full of dollars and photos of a happy life. Which was why on the day he boarded an Air France flight from Douala to Newerck with a connection in Paris, he was certain he wouldn't see Cameroon again until he had claimed his share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America. (Mbue 22)

Those who trace their way back remain half black half white. They have the difficulty to reintegrate into their society. Hybrids, they battle with some sort of inner conflict, sometimes they are rejected by their society or at worse killed as in the case of Samba Diallo in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*. Amna M. aptly captures Samba Diallo's plight in the following lines:

On his return to the village SD is warmly welcomed by the people. But matters did not develop so smoothly; the damages could not be easily repaired and SD feels more lost than before. He does not recognize his country due to the great changes. The fool who takes SD for the teacher since his arrival follows him everywhere and is greatly troubled by the fact that he refuses to pray. The fool tries very hard to push him to prayer but fails. The inner conflict inside SD increases, he senses that God has abandoned him and that he has lost the path of faith forever. And in their confusion the fool uses his weapon on SD in the controversial closing scene of the novel (Badri).

SD stands for Samba Diallo. Many like him who are not physically killed remain aloof and estranged from their native home. No wonder migration and the identity of the migrants remain an issue in the present-day society.

As literature captures and represents her society, migration in its multidimensional nature appears again and again as a central theme in many recent works. Imbolo Mbue treated the theme in no different way from Adichie, Unigwe and others but *Behold the dreamer* is chosen because of its subtle but objective comparison highlighted between Cameroun and America. The juxtaposition of two opposite families each with its ambitions and dreams. They got shattered, nevertheless they later found fulfillment in retracing their different roots. And a handful of young adults who abandon their culture to embrace another in search of their identity made this piece of work a suitable working instrument with which migration, acculturation and African identity will be analyzed and interpreted according to the author's literary world-view.

### **Synopsis of the work.**

The novel tells the story of Jende Jonga a Cameroonian who arrives America as a visitor but decides to change his status. One way to do this is to apply for asylum. Unfortunately his application was declined. While he waited for his application, he, through an American based Nigerian immigration lawyer, applied for his wife to get a students visa and join him in the US. They already had a daughter who died, and a son with whom she left the underdeveloped town of Limbe, her less tolerant father and a host of other relatives and friends to join her loving husband in New York. He drove cabs at first but he later got a much more rewarding job with the wealthy Clark Edwards as a chauffeur. While Neni worked as a certified nursing assistant and got registered in a school from where she can later pursue her dream of being a pharmacist. The Edwards liked their services and gave them gifts for their son. The two families enjoyed a very good rapport and discovered what life was with the rich as well as with the poor.

However, the whole adventure became an unpleasant tale when the Lehman company where Clark Edwards worked began to go downhill. Venice the Edward's first son, fed up with the lies which the American society is, decides to go to India in quest of the truth. Clark begins to visit prostitutes and that eventually made headlines in papers. Cindy Edward (Clark's wife) for whom family was everything could not contend with the situation and got involved with drugs. Jende lost his job when Mrs Edward found out that he did not tell him the whole truth about her husband's whereabouts. Neni dropped out of school partly because she was pregnant and partly because her husband could no longer afford her school fees. Since she was aware of Mrs Edward's involvement with drugs, she blackmailed her into giving her a whooping sum of \$10,000. Cindy Edwards continued with drugs and alcohol and later died.

Jende got two other jobs in restaurants where he washed dishes. These were strenuous jobs that took some toils on his physical and emotional health. His immigration papers were not coming back with any positive response. He must appear before an immigration judge. Peace of mind eluded him until he made that difficult but ultimate decision: they will return to Cameroun to begin life again. Mr Edwards has to retrace his roots back to Virginia with his younger son to begin anew. Meanwhile other migrants who found their feet stayed back to face their fate and force the American society to accept them.

### **Migration and its effects on Mbue's characters.**

Mbue, who herself, is a Cameroonian immigrant to America aptly captures in a fiction, the realities of the American society during economic recession of 2008. The financial emancipation is one of the leading factors that make people move from one place to resettle in another. Either for their livestock, their household, their extended families or for they themselves. The author through her characters presents the readers with not only some migrants but the reasons why they left and consequences of their movements.

**Winston:** The book simply identified this character as Jende's cousin. But for the relationship he kept with the Jonga family, not much was said of him in the novel. If he attended BHS a school meant for the children of the rich, he must have come from a wealthy or rather well-to-do family. He won an American lottery and migrated to the US, studied law and is now practicing as a Lawyer. He paid Jende's way to the US, rejoices with him in joy and shares his sorrows too. It was through him that Jende got his well-paying-job as Mr Clark's chauffeur. He plans to woo back his former girlfriend and marry her, since his has had a number girlfriends but never settle down with one. Apparently he is one those successful immigrants. He got his green card/passport, studied and has a good job, has a car and plans to marry soon. He also sends money home in and as at when due. Winston obviously did not belong to the poverty stricken group in Cameroun. What could have made him leave his home land? America is presented here as the land of dreamers. He migrated to grab and accomplish his dreams. With his green card, he enjoys certain freedom and some sense of belonging which other immigrants do not have. He seemed to have fully grabbed the intricacies of the US system and he utilizes them well. It is not unequivocally disclosed if he misses home or not, but there is a high propensity that he will return home at a later age. The fact that he asked Jende to build and manage a project for him back home is a pointer that he is not yet lost to the American society.

**Bubakar:** A Nigerian born US immigrant lawyer. Nothing was said about his backgrounds it is difficult to decipher why he embarked on the journey to America. He is certainly one of those loud-mouthed immigrant lawyers who does not hesitate to attribute all glory to themselves. He thrives in helping illegal immigrants to get a legal status. Bubakar could have left his home country for any reason but nothing in his conversations points out that he would go back. One of those few immigrants who prefer to stay and fight their way through.

**Venice Edwards:** The first son of Clark and Cindy Edwards. An American, born in affluence. A student in a law school. He leaves his doting mother and wealthy father and sojourns in India in quest of truth (87). Venice can be grouped among those who migrate out of sheer curiosity, adventure, in search the truth and self identity. He hates the lies and dream that the American society was. He tells Jende: "That's exactly the problem! People don't want to open their eyes and see the Truth because the illusion suits them. As long as they are fed whatever lies they want to hear they're happy, because Truth means nothing to them." (87) Venice wants to be in touch with the reality. So, to his mother's chagrin, he leaves America for a more orthodox society. Whether he will go back to America depends on his discovery. From his telephone conversation, the reader could sense a more mature, caring and self actualized adult, different from the contumacious young man that left. It would not be wrong to state that his own migration had a positive effect on him.

One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and, if need be, create an alternative life for yourself. That way everybody else become the other and you the center of the universe. (Farah 184)

The above citation suits the character above more than the one below. Venice acquired some self actualization with which he approached life's situation. Thanks to migration, he took his destiny in his hands and made something out of it. However for the protagonist it was the contrary. Jende, if at all he had a destiny, had no idea what it was let alone master it. He employs every means to create an alternative life for himself and his family but it all crumbled.

**Jende:** The protagonist. In the whole story were pockets of reasons why Jende and his wife left Cameroon. The main reason he left his country was in quest of a greener pasture. He had a dream! But how could this dream be realized? He was convinced that:

You do not come from a family with a name, forget it. That is just how it is, sir. Someone like me, what can I ever become in a country like Cameroon? I came from nothing. No name. No money. My father is a poor man. Cameroon has nothing. (37)

Jende did not have a rosy childhood like Winston or Venice. He managed through his paltry education, got himself involved in a love affair that fetched him a 3-months imprisonment because he impregnated young Neni who also had to drop out of school. He got employed as a labourer with state council, (he sweeps the road). Neni's father would not let a road sweeper marry his daughter since that would mean abject poverty for them. In order to escape poverty, marry his heartthrob, give sufficient financial support to his immediate and extended family. He had to emigrate. Migrating to America is not synonymous with realizing the dreams associated with it. With his limited education but armed with the virtue of honesty, hard work and service he tried his hands in many things, from driving cabs to being a chauffeur of a wealthy man, to washing dishes in 2 restaurants. All his efforts to get a green card were in vain thus his dream of giving his wife and children a good life in America was shattered. He had to return to his native land. At every stage of his sojourn, he missed home. When life became unbearable for him, he had to make the unwelcome decision to leave New York, the land of his dreams and return to Limbe. Migration sure had its effect on him. He was going home not as an asylum seeker nor a cab driver, not even as a dishwasher but as a rich man. Who still has more realizable dreams of making a positive impact in business in his country. A respectably married man with two children and a substantial amount of dollars to give them a happy home. (53)

**Neni** is one of the leading characters in the novel and the wife of the protagonist. Having dropped out of school and confined to the four walls of her father's compound because of unplanned pregnancy, her unsympathetic father made life unbearable for her. It is this experience that nurtured her dream. She longed ardently to join the father of her children and to leave the inauspicious shores of her native land. She never missed any opportunity to compare the two countries. Going back to Limbe was out of the question. But she had to go back when she had to go. The consequences of this outward movement will be seen in her status and the unflinching spirit she exhibited while exacting her demands from Mrs Edwards through a heartless blackmail. Status-wise she became a married woman, a student who had bogus dreams of becoming a pharmacist, a working class lady who can now contribute to the financial well-being of her family. The thought of going to Limbe made her sad but she was going to do everything to maintain the class and level she has attained while in New York. She was a changed Neni, a woman declared worthy of love and protection. (17)

**Cindy Edwards** It might also be interesting to note that the affluent Cindy also walked away from poverty.

“You probably think I was born into this kind of money right?” ... “Well I wasn’t, ...I came from a poor family, A very very poor family”. ...”But I came away from all that, as you can see. I worked my way through college, got a job, my own appartement, learned how to carry myself well and fit effortlessly in this new world so I would never be looked down again or seen as a piece of shit,” (102-103)

Cindy was definitely not born in New York. Hers was an intra state migration but it had its full effects on her. She changed her statues from a poor “piece of shit” to a wife of one the wealthiest men in town, she has a family she never really had, but unfortunately she clings so tightly to these “No one can ever take away from me, the things I have achieved for myself.” (103) and they actually became her ruin.

### **Cultural bereavement, acculturation and African identity as seen in the novel**

An elementary definition of culture presents it as the people’s way life, while bereavement can be understood as mourning or grieving. Cultural bereavement then, is the grief one expresses at the loss of one’s routine way of life. This includes but not limited to: the social structure, language, feeding, traditional and religious values. Migration whether forced or voluntary is one factor that uproots an individual from her erstwhile culture. Dinesh and Becker attest that “Migration involves the loss of the familiar, including language (especially colloquial and dialect), attitudes, values, social structures and support networks.” (Bhugra and Becker). The characters in our corpus are definitely not spared of the torture that are associated with cultural bereavement.

Wintson’s migration may be viewed as voluntary. As far as luxury was concerned, he was comfortable in Cameroon. But to get a better life and grab his own share of the cake, he played the American lottery, won and found himself in the land of his dreams. Jende on the hand could neither marry his heartthrob nor meet up with the financial demands of his immediate family. Neni’s heart departed Cameroon alongside Jende. She no longer found a home with her mother and siblings. She whined and wept under the cruel hands of her unsympathetic father. From the analysis above, it is deduced that this couple was forced by the circumstance of life to flee their fatherland. Neni, despite her griefs

holds tightly to her American dreams but lives in the past and incessantly compares America to Cameroon.

“... wait you want to compare American bars to drinking spots in Limbe? ... There is no comparison, Okey? In Limbe, you sit outside, its warm and sunny. You are enjoying a nice breeze, listening to makossa in the background, watching people go up and down the street. That is real enjoyment not these places where ... People act as if things in America have to be better than things everywhere else. America doesn't have the best of everything and when it comes to where you can go and enjoy a nice drink, it can never be compare with Cameroon.” (75)

After each comparison, Cameroon remains better. Yet Neni clings to her dreams. Even this ambivalence attitude is a psychological torture emanating from cultural bereavement.

It does seem that the forced migrants have it harder than the voluntary migrants but either way, they all suffer the bereavement but in their individual ways and at their own levels. As soon as the characters arrived their host-country, they congregated, forming a group to which they attached themselves in order to foster oneness, find a psychological fulfillment, further their africaness and bring to light their African identity.

As they bemoaned their eluding identity, it was quite obvious that acculturating into the host society is as difficult as it is almost impossible. This paper agrees with Ferdman and Horenczyk who are of the opinion that,

“it is very likely that the cultural identity of the immigrant individual will affect and be affected by his or her acculturation process. A positive view of the attributes that are seen as characterizing the majority society, for example may strengthen a positive attitude towards the adoption of the dominant group's norms and values.” (85)

The above assertion explains why the Cameroonian immigrants to America who we are considering in this paper have such negative views which in turn made their acculturation process difficult. Segregation was a common phenomenon which engendered some of these negative views. The Jonga family lived in Harlem - the poor, black neighborhood and only visited Manhattan to work as chauffeur or house maids to the rich white Edward family. Neither Jende nor Neni had a white friend. All their relationships and social activities rotated within the African community. It was important to find their sense of belonging among africans in New York. Mbue captures it well in the following lines:

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...for the first time: she was realizing that most people on the street were walking with someone who looked like them... Most people were sticking to their kind. Even in New York City, even in a place of many Nations and culture, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, preferred their kind when it came to those they kept closest. And why shouldn't they? It was far easier to do so than to spend one's limited energy trying to blend into a world one's never meant to be part of. ... She had her world in Harlem and never again would she try to wriggle her way into a world in Midtown, not even just for an hour. (80)

Venice on the other hand belong to the group of which Ferdman and Horenczyk say :

Yet it is quite possible that individuals may identify strongly with their group without necessarily identifying strongly with the group members and their typical features. (Karasawa, 1991). In many such instances, people will base their identification with their group on some ideal image of the group, while at the same time admitting that these ideal features at present do not tend to characterize most members or the typical member of the group. (85)

In Venice one sees a young American who does not identify strongly with his group. He has to emigrate in search of the truth because he does believe in the lies which the American society has become.

### **Conclusion**

A look at the novel even cursorily reveals the author's stand point on immigration. Right from the title, she address her characters as dreamers. Their quest is devoid of reality and indeed, every character in the book has a dream. The Jonga as well as the Edward families had each their yearnings. While the former longed to escape poverty, live in America and give their children sound education and happy life, the latter who already walked out of poverty desired a tight family bond. And each dream no matter how far they went after it remained elusive. America is not a perfect country more so there are poor people in it. Cameroon as presented in this novel may be an economically backward country but there are many happy people in there.

The Edwards learnt that there is more to family bond, love and oneness than ordinary cash can afford. Unfortunately, this lesson came after Cindy's death and Venice's departure to India. Clark and Mighty his younger son had to move back home to Virginia.

For the Jongas, the decision to return to Cameroon was not an easy one, but the moment it was taken, no other offer was more attractive. Mbue recommends then that if the host country remains hostile, if the process of acculturation remains long and unattainable, if the craving for the countryside becomes unquenchable, the most effective antidote would be to retrace your roots. She writes through Clark Edward's naive poems:

Home will never go away  
Home will be there when you come back  
You may go to bring back fortune  
You may go to escape misfortune  
You may even go, just because you want to go  
But when you come back  
We hope you'll come back  
Home will still be here. (124)

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