



Displacement, Dispossession, Trauma, Refugee Crises: The New Middle Passage in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

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Abstract—This paper analyses Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019), focusing on its depiction of African migrants experience as the new middle passage. The novel as a diasporic narrative reveals the experiences of immigrants especially of war torn Africa, and the Middle East in Europe. The setting in Europe, revolves around cities like Berlin, Basel, London and Lampedusa Island, where the unnamed narrator, meets various immigrants who narrate their stories of life in Europe, and their experiences as they travel to Europe. The study conceptualizes the middle passage as a movement symbolic of the forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. The concept will be examined in the six titled divisions of the book, to discuss the experiences of displacement, trauma and refugee crises. The study concludes that African migrants yet again encounter challenges, because they are forced to leave their homes and communities due to political and social upheavals and in the course of movement, are traumatized and dispossessed of their homes, families, and identities, leading to profound psychological and emotional suffering. The author argues that the middle passage experience situates African refugees as people who have been robbed of their past and their future, forced to live in a perpetual state of limbo and uncertainty, as a result of power. The narrative discourse thus examines the complex power dynamics that emerge in the context of migration, which are the exploitation of migrants by smugglers and the tensions that arise between different groups of refugees.

Keywords—Migrant literature, refugees, trauma, middle passage, Europe

I. INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW OF TRAVELLERS

In recent times, in the genre of migrant writing, dispossession and human suffering are major topics in current literature. This study contributes to the discourse, but with emphasis on refugee experiences of trauma, loss and reconnection. In the novel, *Travellers*, Helon Habila notes that the experience of travel frequently entails a strong sense of loss and displacement. The study will investigate how the experiences of refugees help Habila's novel examine the issue of dispossession. *Traveller* (2019) is a novel about homelessness and displacement. It chronicles the tale of three African migrants who cross paths while travelling through Libya to reach Europe. The book portrays the terrible reality of migration, including the abuse and exploitation that many migrants encounter while travelling.

For instance, the character of Kela, a Ghanaian woman, is forced into prostitution to pay for her passage to Europe, while the character of Osman, a young Nigerian guy, is made to work in a Libyan prison camp after being seized by smugglers.

The psychological effects of relocation and dispossession are also discussed in the novel as the protagonists struggle with their loss of identity, feeling of belonging, and ties to their homes. The character of Lambo, a middle-aged Nigerian guy who has lived in Italy for many years yet still feels alienated, is a good example of this. He had been so far away from Nigeria that he was neither a Nigerian nor an Italian, as Habila (2019) puts it. He was a man who existed somewhere in the middle, in limbo. The themes of human suffering and dispossession in *Travellers* are representative of the general experiences of migrants and refugees around

the globe. Displacement, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021) "uproots people from their homes, communities, and support networks, often leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation" (UNHCR, 2021). Because refugees and migrants frequently experience discriminatory laws and attitudes that further marginalize them and restrict their access to opportunities and crucial services, their vulnerability is exacerbated.

Rufus, a Nigerian guy who is one of the novel's primary protagonists, must leave his home because of political persecution. He is compelled to leave his wife and kids behind and is left with a severe sense of grief and estrangement. In quest of safety and a better life, he sets off for Europe, but as he does so, memories of his past and the people he left behind follow him. The way Habila depicts Rufus's journey sheds emphasis on the emotional costs associated with uprooting oneself and the challenges of beginning anew in a different location. Similar feelings of dispossession are experienced by another character in the novel, a Sudanese woman by the name of Segun. She had to flee to Europe alone after experiencing violence that claimed her husband and children's life. She is plagued by memories of her past and the pain she has passed through, as she tries to build a new life for herself. The way Habila depicts Segun's experiences highlights the emotional and psychological costs of displacement as well as the difficulties in starting over after a loss.

The paper therefore examines how the experiences of refugees are used as a new middle passage, to analyse the issue of dispossession in Habila's novel. It focuses on how the novel depicts the difficulties of rebuilding one's life after loss, the emotional and psychological toll of displacement, and the effects of trauma and loss on the lives of refugees. Additionally, the novel enhances our understanding of refugees' experiences and the significance of empathy and compassion for marginalized groups.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW/ CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Particularly in the genre of migrant writing, dispossession and human suffering are major topics in current literature. In order to counteract prevailing narratives about migration and displacement, marginalised voices can communicate their experiences, challenges, and stories through migrant literature (Kocak, 2021). In order to foster empathy and compassion for migrants and other marginalised communities, it is crucial. The concept of dispossession draws attention to the experiences of marginalised people who have lost their identity, culture, and land (Federici, 2004). Due to political unrest, the main

protagonist in *Travellers*, Gina and Manu, are forced to leave their home and their country, which deprives them of their feeling of place and belonging. These studies shed light on the difficulties faced by people who are compelled to leave their homes because of political, economic, and social circumstances as well as the psychological and emotional costs associated with such uprooting.

Dispossession

Losing property, homes, and things is referred to as "dispossession," and it is a typical occurrence for refugees and other displaced people. Dispossession can have a significant impact on both individuals and communities, aggravating feelings of loss and alienation from one's history (Bhugra, Gupta, & Bhui, 2015). In addition to increasing the emotional and psychological repercussions of displacement, dispossession can lead to a loss of identity and a sense of belonging. Literature on the effects of dispossession on refugees and their experiences, In "The Unsettling of Europe: How Migration Reshaped a Continent," Olivia Laing explores the perspectives of refugees and the effects of relocation on their lives. According to Laing, relocation and dispossession are experiences that are not only physically unpleasant but also emotionally and psychologically taxing. "To be displaced is to be cut off from the physical, emotional, and cultural landmarks that orient us in the world," the author writes (Laing, 2019, p. 14). "To be thrown into a state of insecurity and precarity that can be profoundly disorienting." The work of Laing emphasises how crucial it is to comprehend the psychological costs of displacement and the necessity of treating the underlying trauma and loss that refugees go through.

Similar to this, Uma Kothari investigates the effects of dispossession on refugees and their experiences in her article "Dispossession and Forced Migration: A Critical Review." According to Kothari, losing one's home results in both a physical loss and a loss of one's sense of identity and belonging. According to Kothari (2008), "dispossession entails more than the loss of land, property, and possessions; it also involves the loss of identity, belonging, and social relationships". The importance of comprehending the intricate nature of dispossession and its effects on the lives of refugees is highlighted by Kothari's work.

Human Suffering:

The experience of migration and displacement is often characterized by human suffering, which can manifest in various ways. The emotional and psychological toll of displacement can have long-lasting effects on refugees and their families (Bhugra, Gupta, & Bhui, 2015). Moreover, refugees often face challenges in adapting to a new culture, language, and social norms, which can further exacerbate

their sense of dislocation and isolation. In her novel "The New Odyssey: The Story of the Twenty-First Century Refugee Crisis," journalist and author Patrick Kingsley examines the experiences of refugees and the human suffering that often accompanies displacement. Kingsley argues that refugees are often subject to extreme forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, and that their experiences are often characterized by uncertainty and precarity. He writes, "Refugees are among the most vulnerable people on the planet...their lives are defined by uncertainty and instability" (Kingsley, 2017, p. 10). Kingsley's work highlights the importance of understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of human suffering in the context of migration.

Migrant Literature

The experiences of migrants, refugees, and people who have been uprooted are explored in the literature category known as migrant literature. In order to counteract prevailing narratives about migration and displacement, marginalised voices can communicate their experiences, challenges, and stories through migrant literature (Kocak, 2021). In order to foster empathy and compassion for migrants and other marginalised communities, it is crucial. In her novel "Writing on the Move: Migrant Literature in the Age of Globalisation," Elleke Boehmer explores the significance of migrant writing in fostering empathy and understanding towards refugees and other marginalised communities. According to Boehmer, migrant literature has the power to expose misconceptions about migration and displacement and to shed light on the challenges and problems faced by refugees and migrants. According to Boehmer (2010), "Migrant literature allows us to see the world from the perspective of those on the move, and to gain insight into their experiences, struggles, and hopes". The work of Boehmer emphasises how crucial migrant literature is to fostering compassion and understanding for refugees and other marginalised populations.

Theories and Migrant Literature

Postcolonial Theory: Postcolonial theory, which emphasises the continued effects of colonialism on the global south, can be used to interpret Habila's book. In the story, it is highlighted how Western powers have colonised, exploited, and impoverished African countries, causing massive migration and displacement. In the words of Habila, "The West...continues to exploit the riches of Africa and Asia, while treating their people like beggars" (Habila 38).

Trauma Theory: Trauma theory can be used to analyse *Travellers* because of how deeply traumatic the characters' experiences are. The characters have a variety of psychological and mental disorders as a result of being

subjected to brutality, exploitation, and being cut off from their loved ones. As one of the book's characters observes, "We carry the weight of our traumas with us, every day, everywhere we go" (Habila 179).

Critical Refugee Studies: An interdisciplinary topic known as critical refugee studies looks at the political, economic, and social factors that lead to uprooting and forced migration. By underlining the ways that neoliberal economic policies, military interventions, and environmental disasters contribute to the refugee crisis, *Travellers* engages with this field. In the words of Habila, "We are all refugees, in one way or another, from the world we have created for ourselves" (Habila 205).

Cultural Studies: Cultural studies place a strong emphasis on how culture shapes our perceptions of the outside world. Habila examines the cultural contrasts and affinities between African and European communities in *Travellers*. He emphasises how African immigrants must negotiate foreign cultural norms and expectations while being frequently labelled as "other" in Europe. As one character in the book observes, "We are strangers in a strange land, and we must learn to adapt to survive" (Habila 112).

Feminist Theory: In its examination of gendered experiences of suffering and dispossession, Habila's novel also intersects with feminist philosophy. The novel female protagonists frequently experience sexual assault, exploitation, and objectification. Habila emphasises the connections between gender inequality and patriarchal regimes and the experiences of migration and displacement. According to one of the book's female characters, "We women are always the first to suffer...we are always the most vulnerable" (Habila 72).

Psychoanalytic Theory: The novel's examination of eviction and human suffering is also compatible with psychoanalytic philosophy. As they try to come to grips with their terrible pasts and uncertain futures, the characters in the novel are frequently motivated by latent urges and impulses. This psychological complexity is reflected in Habila's use of broken timelines and stream-of-consciousness narrative.

Critical Race: The influence of race and racism on social, political, and economic structures is emphasised by critical race theory. By underlining the ways that African migrants are susceptible to racial discrimination and stereotyping in Europe, *Travellers* engages with this topic. The story explores the pervasive racism present in European countries and how it affects African immigrants' lives. In the words of Habila, "Race is the great divider, the ultimate weapon of oppression" (Habila 98).

III. CONCLUSION

The novel *Travellers* by Helon Habila offers a compelling examination of the issue of dispossession in migrant writing. The novel emphasises the emotional cost of displacement and the challenges of starting over in a new location. Habila's work serves as a heartbreaking reminder of the human cost of displacement and the significance of showing compassion and empathy for refugees as the number of forcibly displaced individuals' increases globally. Loss, dislocation, and trauma are themes explored in the experiences of migrants and refugees in the novel. By giving voice to the voiceless and posing provocative questions about prevailing notions of migration and displacement, migrant literature has played a crucial part in advancing this understanding. The story, which is set in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, follows a number of people as they travel through Africa and Europe in search of safety and a better life. Habila's work emphasises the richness and diversity of the refugee experiences, as well as the significance of comprehending the psychological and emotional costs associated with exile, like the middle passage.

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