

Interrogating Diaspora Lands as Milk and Honey in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of characters in their country of origin, as well as their experiences in the host countries as represented in Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers. This study is motivated by the fact that the diaspora lands have been perceived and even described for so long a time as an El dorado, or better still, the land in which milk and honey flows, and thus, attracting migrants to move from their country of origin to the other side of the Atlantic, in search of "greener pasture". It is worthy to note that the harsh socio-economic and political situation experienced by Africans, pushed most of these citizens to migrate to the West, with the hope of achieving socio-economic and even political prowess. However, these migrants are rather exposed to the painful realities of the life that welcomes them, which is contrary to what they had imagined, or dreamt of. Most of these African migrants in the United States of America, encounter a series of challenges, making it virtually impossible for them to integrate themselves in every sphere in these societies. These characters are oppressed, marginalised and even exempted from the socio-economic and political landscape in these countries due to their race, which is a defining feature in the whites' culture, betraying the lack of commonality, fraternity, and togetherness which are rather values imbedded in the cultures of these African migrants. From this problematic stand, the following questions are raised: why do characters consider the diaspora as land of milk and honey? How does the migrant experiences in America betray the notion of diaspora lands as territories flowing with milk and honey? What survival strategies do these characters employ? This study is therefore predicated upon the claim that the socio-economic and

political landscape of most African communities are push factors fueling the desire of many Africans to seek a better life in the West. However, these characters are disillusioned since their expectations are not close to the reality in these new countries. To survive, some of these characters make constant journeys to their homelands while others stick to their indigenous cultures as a means to venerate their ancestral past and cope with the excesses of modernity, while some return permanently to their homelands to escape hardship and frustration.

Keywords: Diaspora Lands, Migration, Myth, Milk and Honey, Homeland, Disillusionment

Introduction

This paper seeks to interrogate the notion of diaspora lands as milk and honey, examining how Mbue's novel challenges dominant narratives around diaspora and identity, and what implications these representations may have for our understanding of diaspora communities and their experiences. It should be noted that the west has been conceptualized by many for centuries as a world flowing with milk and honey. The conception of the west as a promise land, or better still, a place of abundance and prosperity acts as a pull factor, attracting many African migrants to move from their countries of origin to pursuit a better life full of opportunities in the other side of the ocean, most especially, in the United States of America. However, the harsh realities and obstacles encountered by most of the African immigrants in the host countries creates a feeling of disillusionment. This is because most of these immigrants are burdened with political, racial, cultural differences, language barriers, employment difficulties, economic hardship, and the complexities of the immigration system. These frustrations lead to a feeling of hopelessness as they try to find their place in a new country while holding on to their dreams and aspirations.

In the midst of the financial crisis of 2008, Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* offers a touching exploration of the diaspora experience, one is marked by the complexities of navigating between different cultures and societies. The story of Jende and Neni, a Cameroonian couple living in New York City, raises important questions about the nature of home and identity,

particularly in the context of diaspora. As Mbue's characters grapple with the tensions between their desire for a sense of belonging and their experiences of cultural displacement, they are forced to confront the often-fraught relationship between their homeland and their host country. This study examines the experiences of characters in their country of origin, as well as their experiences in the host countries as represented in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*.

Statement of the Problem

It is worthy to note that the harsh socio-economic and political situation experienced by Africans in their country of origin, pushed most of them to migrate to the West, with the hope of achieving socio-economic and even political prowess. However, these migrants are rather exposed to the painful realities of the life that welcomes them, which is contrary to what they had imagined. Most of these African migrants in the United States of America, encounter a series of challenges, making it virtually impossible for them to integrate themselves in every sphere in this society. These characters are oppressed, marginalised and even exempted from the socio-economic and political landscape in this country due to their race, which is a defining feature in the whites' culture, betraying the lack of commonality, fraternity, and togetherness which are rather values embedded in the cultures of these African migrants.

Objectives of the Research

This paper seeks to examine the representation of diaspora in *Behold the Dreamers*. That is, it explores how Mbue's novel challenges and reshapes dominant discourses surrounding diaspora, identity, and the conception of the West as a 'promise land, land of milk and honey, or, land of abundance and opportunities, and how the realities faced by the immigrants complicate this idealised version. Besides, the paper examines the complexities of diasporic identity by investigating how the immigrants in the novel navigate the cultural, racial, and socio-economic challenges in America, and how these challenges affect their sense of belonging.

Research Questions

From the problematic stand above, the following questions are raised: Why do characters consider the diaspora as a land of milk and honey? How does the migrant experiences in America betray the notion of diaspora lands as territories flowing with milk and honey? What survival strategies do these characters adopt?

Hypothesis

This study is therefore predicated upon the claim that the socio-economic and political landscape of most African communities are push factors fueling the desire of many Africans to seek a better life in the West. However, these characters are disillusioned since their expectations are not close to the reality in this new country. As a survival strategy, Jende decides to return permanently to Limbe Cameroon as a means to escape hardship and frustration.

Theoretical Frame Work

This study adopts the postcolonial theory. This theory is applied in the analysis to deconstruct and interrogate the conception of the west as a promise land, or better still, a place of abundance and prosperity. The postcolonial theory refers to a set of critical perspectives in literature that grapple with the legacy of colonial rule. According to Elleke Boehmer, the postcolonial theory as a literary analytic approach on literature revolves around the “conditions in which colonised peoples seek to take their place forcibly or otherwise as historical subjects” (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 3). Postcolonial theory further explores the challenges of forging a national identity after the colonial era, examining how writers from formerly colonised nations strive to express, affirm and reclaim their cultural identities, previously distorted or erased by colonial powers. Some of the advocates of this theory include: Edward Said, John Lye, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Frantz Fanon, and others.

Bill Ashcroft et al, (1995) write that:

Postcolonial theory involves discussion about
experience of various kinds: immigration,

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 of these come into being. Postcolonial theory reflects the egregious classification of 'first' and 'third' world and contests the lingering fallacy that the postcolonial is somehow synonymous with the economically underdeveloped. (2-3)

As argued by various critics, postcolonial theory fundamentally challenges and dismantles assumptions of superiority in any society, promoting a more equitable perspective. There are several concepts underlying postcolonial theory and for the sake of this study we shall highlight otherness and its significance to this paper.

According to John Lye, the western concept of the oriental is based, as Abdul Jan Mohamed argues, on the Manichean Allegory (seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites). If the West is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine and evil. Everything is reduced to a set of dichotomies, such as black or white. This concept has relevance in this study for in the novel under study, the binaries "us versus them" are seen in the relationship between the whites and the black immigrants; and the "us versus us" are implicit in the male/female matrices. Logically linked to the concept of otherness is subalternism. Its significance in this work is justified by the disapproving attributes ascribed to certain characters in the novels under study. In the article entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, Gayatri Spivak, quoting Guha (1982), asserts that in the Indian context "people" and "subaltern classes" are used to describe those assumed to have no history and who cannot speak as opposed to the elite group (26).

Discussions

Behold the Dreamers by Imbolo Mbue explores themes such as migration, racism, poverty, economic hardship, language barriers, and gender-based violence. The novel brings to light the experiences of Cameroonian immigrants in their country of origin which pushes them to migrate to the West, as well as the lives of these immigrants in America as they struggle to attain their dreams and aspirations by working extremely hard, while others seek education in their zeal to acquire certificates and obtain lucrative jobs that will permit them to become financially free, establish themselves, and provide for their families back home. This section of this study probes into the complexities of the diasporic experiences of these immigrants. The experiences of the Jonga's family in America highlights the contrast between the idealised conception of the West as a land of milk and honey and the harsh realities faced by the immigrants. By analysing the characters' experiences of cultural displacement, economic hardship, racism, tough immigration system, and the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, we reveal how these challenges debunk the notion of the America as a 'promised land'.

Socio-economic frustration in Cameroon and the quest for success in America.

Cameroon is one of the countries in Central African which has been grappling with a plethora of socio-economic challenges including corruption, poverty as well as limited economic opportunities, which has resulted in a high level of poor living conditions and frustration among its citizens. This section of the study explores the push factors that force Cameroonian immigrants to flee away from their country of origin to seek for greener pastures in the United States. The struggles, frustrations, and miserable living conditions of most of these immigrants make them to perceive and consider the United States as a country that offers limitless opportunities for socio-economic growth to anyone who succeeds in reaching there. It is this illusion that is making the Jonga's family, just like other migrants to move to the United States at all cost. The unattainable socio-economic freedom as well as the political frustration and hardship in Cameroon,

precisely in Limbe is what forced Jende and others to get a better life in America.

One of the issues affecting the Cameroonian society, leading to untold misery and suffering and poverty nepotism as seen in the novel. This plague is very evident in this society as it is fueled by a class system whereby social mobility is limited and economic opportunities and resources for development are reserved for just those who are born into a privilege home, or those who know and have people. We experience a glimpse of this when Jende asserts:

Because in my country, sir,” Jende said, his voice ten decibels lower, far less unbound and animated than it had been before he heard that someone was in danger of being fired, “for you to become somebody, you have to be born somebody first. You do not come from a family with money, forget it. 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— (MBUE, 2016, p. 27).

From this citation, the social and economic realities, especially the economic hardship experienced by Cameroonians in this society, is brought to light. Through the citation again, the Cameroon’s rigid social hierarchy, where the family in which one is born, and the connection one has conditions their possibility for success. This class system as presented by Mbue, through the character Jende, as seen in the excerpt above, demonstrates the limitations imposed on individuals who are unfortunate to be born in families without this privilege. As a Cameroonian, Jende becomes a victim of such a system, as he is born as a nobody in a destitute family. From his words, we sense his frustration, despair and hopelessness, revealing the effects of society that does not grant equal opportunities to its citizens irrespective of their age, sex, and class, as opportunities for growth depend on birthrights and connections. From the statement “I come from

nothing", Jende eventually affirms his feeling of powerlessness and insignificance in such a society where the underdogs like himself have no chance for growth as they rather barely strive to survive.

A similar instance to justify this tribalism and nepotism is seen when Jende asserts:

Her father had stopped working at the seaport in '93, forced out by a Bamileke boss who wanted his tribesman to take Neni's father's job. With no warning, he had been transferred to a far less lucrative position at the Treasury Department in Limbe, and six months after that his widowed sister had died, leaving behind three children he had no choice but to take in and raise alongside his five. (MBUE, 2016, p. 83).

This citation brings out the power dynamics that exist in the Cameroonian landscape as it portrays how those in holding power manipulates circumstances to suit and favour their ethnic groups. Thus, we are exposed to the challenges experienced by individuals considered to be different since they stem from different tribes or background in their workplaces. The Bamileke boss in the excerpt represents the oppressive forces in this landscape who makes life unbearable to those who are not from his tribal line as he functions base on tribal loyalty instead of by fairness and meritocracy. This is one of the sentiments that push young dynamic Cameroonians to flee the country.

Another factor pushing many Cameroonians out of the country is poverty and lack of opportunities. As a result, many youths see no reason for staying in the country as it offers no possibility for economic prowess, growth and eventual financial liberty. Most of these young stars then aspire to seek better life and living conditions elsewhere, especially America. We see this in the response of Jende when Mr. Clark Edwards asked him why he came to America if his country is beautiful. In response, Jende asserts:

Jende thought for a second; he thought about what to say without saying too much.

“Because my country is no good, sir,” he said.
“It is nothing like America. I stay in my country, I would have become nothing. I would have remained nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir? I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man. (MBUE, 2016, p. 26)

This citation reveals the reality the generation cycle of hardship, poverty and miserable conditions of most Cameroonian represented here by Jende, whose father lived under abject poverty, he experienced, and it is evident that his children are bound to experience the same fate as their ancestors. The cause of this poverty and hardship is due to the lack of economic opportunities. This is seen through the repetition of the word “nothing”, which emphasizes Jende’s fear and uncertainty of his future and that of his son. The use of contrast by Jende here is to emphasize the fact that America is everything that Cameroon is not. Jende’s response to Mr. Edwards question reveals the desperation as well as longing that most often, accompanies the immigrant experiences.

Mbue in the novel under study also projects the intersection of poverty and education. Due to poverty and lack of opportunities for financial freedom, the education of children becomes jeopardized. Children though vulnerable, experience the bitter consequences of poverty as they are not only starved, but they are exempted from education which is one of their fundamental rights. Jende reveals the following when Mrs. Edwards asked to know he is upset, “Yes, madam, nothing too big. They drove his children away from school because they have not paid their school fees. They have not gone to school for one week now. That is why he is calling me... his children went to school with rubber shoes held together with twine” (MBUE, 2016, pp. 61-62). Jende through this citation, highlights the harsh realities of poverty and its effect on children, especially on their education. The fact that children are chased away of from school as a result of unpaid fees proves the extent to which this socioeconomic barrier can

jeopardize the future of the youths who are purported leaders of tomorrow. The heart-wrenching glimpse of family struggle in the midst of poverty is seen through the image of rubber shoes held together with twine. This imagery emphasizes the miserable conditions through which these children face as they are determined to become men in the future.

Apart from the educational frustrated faced by children as a result of lack of economic opportunities in Cameroon, most adults are rather caught in the grips between survival and aspiration in their country. They become victims of social frustration and societal rejection. Jende discloses this when he says, "There is no good or bad job in my country. Any job is a good job in Cameroon, Mr. Edwards. Just to have somewhere that you can wake up in the morning and go to is a good thing. But what about the future? That is the problem. I could not marry my wife" (MBUE, 2016, p. 29). From Jende, it is seen that in Cameroon, there is scarcity of jobs and employment opportunities and as such, there is gratitude for mere employment regardless the nature of the job. Through the rhetorical question, "what about the future?", Jende interrogates portrays the uncertainty to possible future in the country as the jobs and the miserable salaries cannot guarantee a future. This is evident through his lamentation of his marriage which could not have been attained due to his financial instability when he was in Cameroon. Jende's inability to marry his wife symbolises the manners in which economic hardship and insecurity can delay or frustrate the destiny of youths in this country.

In the same light, the harsh living conditions experienced by Jende, especially the fact that he goes to prison because he impregnated Neni, the crew prison conditions, couple with his poor and hopeless situation forced him to take a radical decision; that of leaving Cameroon to start a new life somewhere else. Jende reveals his situation when he says:

While in prison after impregnating Neni; after
Neni's father had denied his request to marry
her for what seemed like the hundredth time;
... like during those four months he'd spent in
prison in Buea, waiting for his father to

borrow enough money to convince Neni's father to request his release. Everything about prison had been far more horrendous than he'd imagined: the cold mountain air, which made his skin itch and had him shivering from evening to morning; the inadequate portions of barely palatable food; the dormitories packed end to end with snoring men every night; the easily transmittable diseases, like the dysentery he'd caught... It was during the nights of his illness that he thought about his life, about what he would do with it once he was released. He couldn't think of anything he wanted more than to leave Cameroon, move to a country where decent young men weren't thrown into prison for minor crimes but were instead given opportunities to make something of their lives... Jende returned to Limbe, determined to start saving money to leave the country. He got a job at the Limbe Urban Council, thanks to his friend Bosco, who worked there, and began putting away as much as he could every month for a future with Neni...but his dreams of a life for them in America always seemed farther than the nearest star when he compared his savings to the cost of an airline ticket. (MBUE, 2016, p. 187)

This citation confirms the hardship due to the lack of socioeconomic opportunities and poverty that Jende lives. Jende's revelation about his experience in prison as seen in this excerpt, marks a turning point in his life as he becomes extremely anxious to leave Cameroon and seek for a new and better life full of opportunities abroad. The harsh and cruel nature of the Cameroonian system is exposed through the miserable prison conditions; such as inadequate feeding, cold, overcrowded cells, and easily transmittable diseases. The trance which Jende goes into which permits us to revisit his the very dark moments of his life, portrays his determination for a better future. His aspiration

to move to America represents his urge for an economic and financial liberty, which is farfetched in Cameroon. Thus, we perceive a failed country which is unable to grant suitable conditions and opportunities for socioeconomic empowerment to its citizens.

Still from this excerpt, we are exposed to the challenges faced by citizens to obtain jobs, even the very laborious jobs with meagre salaries, they are expected to know somebody first. Jende is thus, guilty of this corrupt practice destroying the very core of this country as he is able to obtain a job at the Limbe Urban Council since he knows Bosco who works there. This implies that Bosco lobbied for him to get the job. Despite obtaining the job and determined to save and leave the country, Jende's savings is meagre which cannot permit him to buy an airline ticket.

In this section of the work, we have explored the socioeconomic frustrations that push Cameroonian immigrants to seek for financial breakthrough and success in other countries like America. Through the struggles and experiences of Jende, we come to realise the harsh realities of poverty, corruption, and lack of economic opportunities in Cameroon, all of which fuel the desire and aspirations to migrate and seek for a better life in America. However, the next section of this work will reveal the challenges and disillusionment that await these immigrants in America, where the 'dream' often proves vague or unattainable.

Shattered Hopes in the Land of "Hope"

In this section, we reveal the reality faced by the immigrants once they find themselves in the host country, which is far from what they had dreamt or imagined. In America, where the promise of hope, opportunities for socioeconomic empowerment and definitely a better life attract and pull dreamers from all over the world, lies a stark reality of shattered aspirations and disillusioned immigrants. The analysis in this section of the work seeks to reveal fractures between the claimed or, better still, believed 'American Dream' and the harsh realities experienced by immigrants in general and Cameroonian immigrants in particular. Through Jende and Neni, as well as other immigrants, the miserable plights of these characters are brought to the lamb

light as they face economic exploitation, rejection, harsh and hard immigration policies, race, class, and nationality, which tend to limit their social and economic mobility in this country.

Many African migrants travel to the United States with the notion that as soon as they get into the country, their hardship will cease, and within a few years through hard work, they will begin to live the American dream, sending money and realising massive projects back home. The hardship, poverty, and rejection experienced by Jende pushed him to take a decision to migrate to America and start a life afresh, due to the opportunities for growth and better living conditions which will enable him to make a meaning of the remaining pieces of his life. His joy and excitement are seen when he collects his visa from consul office:

The next day Jende had walked out of the consular office with his visa. Yes, he was going to America. He, Jende Dikaki Jonga, son of Ikola Jonga, grandson of Dikaki Manyaka ma Jonga, was going to America! He skipped out of the embassy and onto the dusty streets of Yaoundé... He was leaving Cameroon in a month! Leaving to certainly not return after three months. Who traveled to America only to return to a future of nothingness in Cameroon after a mere 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 Newark 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, 2016, pp. 11-12)

This quotation reveals a crucial period in Jende's life as his dream of leaving Cameroon is finally coming to reality. The excitement and happiness demonstrated by Jende after obtaining his visa reveals his enthusiasm to move to America. As seen earlier, this passion to leave Cameroon is fueled by desire to free himself from poverty, disrespect, and despondency which are all what his life has been reduced to in his country of origin. The rhetorical question in this citation reveals Jende's ambition for financial freedom as he is determined to tap his share of the abundance in America. This can be justified when Jende evokes words like, milk, honey, and liberty. This takes us to the biblical notion of the promise land. Jende's conception of America just like others, as a land of plenty, reveals the American Dream which points to the success and prosperity for all.

Despite his enthusiasm and excitement to move and start a new life in America; claiming his share of the milk and honey readily available for all in America, Jende, just like the other immigrants soon realises after a while in America, that to attain success, they also need to dismantle the factors that designate them as the other. When Jende arrives in America, he realises his fate as he battles with the complexities of the immigration system which becomes his greatest nightmare in this country.

“And what kind of papers do you have in this country?”

“I have papers, sir,” he blurted out, leaning forward and nodding repeatedly, goose bumps shooting up all over his body like black balls out of a cannon.

“I said what *kind* of papers?”

“Oh, I am sorry, sir. I have EAD. EAD, sir ... that is what I have right now.”... The terror that had gripped his chest when Clark Edwards mentioned the word “papers” slowly loosened. He closed his eyes and offered thanks to a merciful Being, grateful half the

truth had been sufficient. What would he
have said if Mr. Edwards had asked more
questions? (MBUE, 2016, pp. 3-4)

From this interview between Jende and Clack Edwards, we realise the precarious conditions of immigrants in America in relation to the issue of papers. The inquiry from Clark Edwards about the types of papers that Jende has paralyses Jende, and this can be seen through his hesitant reply with goose bumps shooting up all over his body. This is because the notion of paper provokes the fear of deportation which fragilises Jende's being and his vulnerability. Again, the reality faced by immigrants is brought to light as they are subjected to constant interrogations about papers, which great panic especially to those who are still battling with the immigration policies. Jende's experience through this citation highlights the fear that defines the migrants' experiences in America.

The issue of papers and the immigration policies becomes the Jende's greatest nightmare in America as he struggles to get his asylum granted. Getting papers in America is not an easy issue. Wilson, Jende's cousin told him that, "Asylum is the best way to get *papier* and remain in the country," Winston told him after he had gotten over his jet lag and spent half a day walking around Times Square in astonishment. "Either that or you marry an old white woman in Mississippi with no teeth" (MBUE, 2016, p. 12). The options presented to Jende by his cousin about getting papers, which entails legal citizenship status. These two options highlight the complexity through which obtaining a legal status in America requires. The first option; asylum, suggests the desperate need for protection from a traumatic experience that the victim is fleeing from. According to Winston, this is the best option for survival in the American society. The second option, which has to do with marrying an aged woman with fallen teeth, is not on humorous, but highlights the commodification of marriage for immigration motives. Through this, we sense the reduction of the institution of marriage is reduced for selfish reasons, as marriage becomes a transaction whereby the desperate immigrant exchanges companionship for a legal citizenship status.

Even after opting to seek for asylum, Jende still does not get it easy from the system as his asylum is not granted even after getting a good lawyer, who eventually files a case on his behalf. The letter from the immigration sent to Jende reads thus, "On the basis of being admitted to the United States in August of 2004 with authorization to remain for a period not to exceed three months and staying beyond November 2004 without further authorization, it has been charged that he is subject to removal from the United States, the letter said. He was to appear before an immigration judge to show why he should not be removed from the country" (MBUE, 2016, p. 170). The threat of deportation had been Jende's greatest burden from his very encounter with Mr. Clack Edwards, and from this moment until the very day he finally gets deported, he has fought with the American immigration after filing a case for asylum which is not granted. He finally realises that, "There was nothing anyone could do. No one could save him from American Immigration. He would have to go back home. He would have to return to a country where visions of a better life were the birthright of a blessed few, to a town from which dreamers like him were fleeing daily" (MBUE, 2016, p. 43). From Jende's words, we sense his frustration as a failure in America, as well as the harsh reality of returning to Cameroon. From this lamentation, Jende presents his country of origin as a place where dreams and aspirations are limited to a privileged few, exposing the socioeconomic disparity in Cameroon. Furthermore, Jende's experiences in America which is characterised by struggles, especially with the immigration, exposes the gap between the conception of America as a promised land, a land of milk and honey, and the harsh realities experienced by the immigrants. Returning to Cameroon, thus, symbolises Jende's disillusionment, and eventually the failure of the American Dream.

The country is highly racist. When Jende tries to comfort Mighty, the Edward's youngest son, who is crying over one of his parents' fights, he becomes more sensitive to the fact that his actions could be misinterpreted due to his skin color. This is seen when he is consoling the child: "Oh, Mighty," Jende said, pulling the child to his chest. He thought for a moment that someone might see him and call the police—a black man with a white boy against

his chest, inside a luxury car, on the side of a street on the Upper East Side” (MBUE, 2016, p. 221). Jende’s awareness of being gazed reveals a society built up of harmful stereotypes against the blacks as they are perceived as deviants. This is evident as his affection and empathy towards the child is characterised by fear of misinterpretation, and a possible criminalisation. Apart from the immigration policies which makes life miserable to the immigrants, racism makes life unbearable for them. Bubakar advises Jende that: “The police is for the protection of white people, my brother. Black men and police are palm oil and water. (MBUE, 2016, p. 74). This revelation from Bubakar exposes the realities of racial tensions and police brutality. This metaphor highlights the police bias against the blacks in America. The contrast in the relationship between the police the different racial groups demonstrate the harmony that exist between the police and the whites and the irreconcilable racial conflict that rather exists between the blacks and the police. In this context, therefore, black men are cast as the “other”, marginalised and at the same time, excluded from the basic security that is supposedly afforded to all the citizens.

Another instance of racial segregation leading to limited economic opportunities is revealed when Winston asserts, “Even if Jende got papers, Winston went on, without a good education, and being a black African immigrant male, he might never be able to make enough money to afford to live the way he’d like to live, never mind having enough to own a home or pay for his wife and children to go to college. He might never be able to have a really good sleep at night” (MBUE, 2016, p. 248). Winston’s statement highlights the fact the papers in America is not equated to achieving economic success in America, as Jende believes. Black immigrants experience a double form of marginalisation; on the one hand because they are black Africans, and on the other hand, because they are male. The implication of this is that, being a black man in America goes with instant barriers which automatically limits opportunities for achieving financial freedom regardless of qualifications. These xenophobic tendencies highlight the complexity encountered by African male immigrants who’s racial and immigrant status unjustly prevents them from obtaining their economic aspirations even if they possess a legal

residence permit. This again, goes a long way to interrogate the American Dream, which centers around the belief that every individual irrespective of their colour, background, race, sexual orientation and age, can achieve success through hard work and determination.

Race clashes and awareness are also part of Neni's consciousness in America. "She is reluctant to go to Winston's birthday party because she is not used to being around white people. When she finally leaves the party earlier before it ends, she is conscious that the look on people's face meant "What the hell are you doing here, you stupid African woman?" (MBUE, 2016, p. 94). First and foremost, Nene's reluctance to attend the party and her suspicion of the people gazing at her marks her feeling of disdain, since she is an African. Neni is thus driven by a sense of inferiority complex as she is conscious of being the other in this space due to her skin colour. The awareness of the people's disapproving looks reveals racism as she is believed to be perceived not just as different due to her colour, but also reduced to a stereotype based on her African heritage. Neni's derogatory sentiment thus, exposes a prejudice that regards her cultural identity and background as being lesser, and thus, unworthy of respect. This superiority/inferiority complex contributes to the construction of what Lois Tyson describes as otherness.

Jende also realises that America is a terrible country that for blacks to get good jobs they must lie. Winston asserts that, "I lie, I lie," Winston said, snickering. "You think a black man gets a good job in this country by sitting in front of white people and telling the truth?" (MBUE, 2016, p. 10). Winston's declaration reveals the systematic injustices and marginalisation against the blacks, who are thus forced to develop survival strategies to adapt and cope in such a hostile country. This survival tactics adopted by the blacks is that of lies telling which serves as self-preservation against honesty which will transform them to failures.

The socio-economic stagnation in Cameroon leading to poverty and terrible living conditions, which pushes many immigrants to flee from Cameroon, is also the reality in America. Jende and Neni soon realised after their stay in America that the description

of America as a land where milk and honey flows was a mirage. This is seen when Fatou expresses her frustration, which is the reality of her life to Neni when she says, "ONE AND A HALF YEARS TODAY," NENI SAID TO FATOU AS THEY WALKED... "That's how long it's been since I came to America." "One and half years?" Fatou said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. "You count half-years, too?... "Lemme tell you something. When you in America *vingt-quatre ans*, and you still poor, you no gonno count no more" (MBUE, 2016, p. 6). This shocking exchange reveals the harsh reality of the immigrant's life in America, which is not a birth of roses, as they had hoped. Fatou's situation, which Neni's is somehow about to experience, highlights the fact that the idealized American dream as the surest way to prosperity, is not achieved by everyone even after numerous years of working in America. The phrase, "you no gonno count no more" suggests Fatou's resignation, disillusionment, and futility due to persistent poverty despite their hard work in 'a land of abundance'. This therefore interrogates the notion that hard work alone can lead to financial stability. Fatou's language reflects her cultural background and a merge with the American culture, leading to the creation of what Homi Bhabha describes as a hybrid identity; that which is neither entirely rooted in Fatou's Cameroonian culture nor fully assimilated into the dominant American culture. The combination of French with English reflects Fatou's hybrid identity, caught between her Cameroonian origin and her American present.

Another immigrant character who faces a similar situation is Betty who has been in America for thirty-one, yet still poor. "Neni couldn't understand why. Betty had come here as a child with her parents and gotten her papers through them. She had been a citizen for over a decade, and yet here she was, in her early forties, working two jobs as a certified nursing assistant at nursing homes, stuck in nursing school. Neni couldn't understand how that was possible" (MBUE, 2016, p. 242). These two citations capture the complex realities of hope, and disappointment that define immigrant's experiences in America. Despite the efforts put in by these characters, they find themselves stuck in a cycle of poverty, thus challenging the narrative of the American Dream.

Poverty and hard living conditions are not only experienced by immigrants in America. Some whites in America live in systemic poverty and relentless financial struggle. Mrs Edwards reveals her horrifying past to Neni when she tells her:

"You probably look at me," she said, "and think I came from a life like this. You probably think I was born into this kind of money, right?"

Neni did not respond.

"Well, I wasn't," Cindy went on. "I came from a poor family. A very, very poor family."

"Me, too, madam—"

Cindy shook her head. "No, you don't understand," she said. "Being poor for you in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there. The shame of it, it's not as bad for you." ...

"Over here, it's embarrassing, humiliating, very painful," Cindy continued, looking into the distance beyond the trees. "Waiting in lines with homeless people to enter food pantries. Living in a poorly heated house in the winter. Eating rice and SPAM for almost every dinner. Being laughed at in school. Having people treat you as if you're some sort of ..." (MBUE, 2016, pp. 92-93)

This conversation between Cindy and Neni discloses not only the pain of poverty, but it also exposes the intense shame and social stigma that comes with it in America. From Cindy's statements, it becomes obvious that poverty in America is accompanied by a psychological as well as emotional burden, which is more severe than that in Africa. Through her declaration, we sense a sort of stereotype, drawing from her assumption that most Africans are poor, and being poor in Africa is fine. This implies that it is normal for Africans to be poor and abnormal for whites. Again, we sense instincts of racism in Cindy's words, which qualifies her racist. She assumes that since she is white, Neni will obviously think she was born rich. This exposes the bias assumption that being white is linked with everything that black is not. It then

becomes evident that this assumption is challenged as it highlights the fact that poverty can affect any individual, irrespective of their race.

Being in America, Jende realises amongst others, the cruel realities of the job market, especially the alarming rate with which people lose their jobs, and the level of unemployment, affecting even American citizens despite their level of education. Jende reveals the case of Leah when he says, "The last time they'd spoken, Leah had sounded depressed about not getting any calls back after sending out over fifty résumés" (MBUE, 2016, p. 165). This brings out the frustrations encountered by many in America. We thus, sense the difficult and competitive nature of employment in this country, whereby even the whites assumed to be well education and possess the necessary experience and qualifications are ignored by employers. Again, America is projected as a land with limited job opportunities. This contradicts what Jende had believed in before moving to this country as he believed that, "America has something for everyone" (MBUE, 2016, *ibid*). The reality in this country betrays the elusiveness of the American Dream which people have believed in from time immemorial. Leah's and Jende's reality challenge the belief that hard work and determination leads to financial success and happiness. Despite the hard work and wealth that Clack Edwards possesses, he is a sorrowful man and his family is a failure. Mighty, out of frustration and lack of his father's affection, presence and care asserts, "I hope he loses his job" (MBUE, 2016, p. 120). From Mighty's statement, we perceive a heavy emotional trauma as a result of his father's persistent absent from the family due to his job. Mighty therefore expresses his sadness and frustration which reveal an emotional void that his father's absence from the family creates. Vince decision to leave America to India is due to this same frustration, and emotional void, as he considers his father as a failure, America and the American Dream as an illusion. Again, Mrs. Edwards constant sadness is a result of the absence of the husband who prioritises his job at the detriment of the wellbeing of his family. We see that despite the hard work and wealth, this family lives in constant pain and sorry to the extent that it finally crumbles.

Jende's life in America is similar to that of Mr. Clark Edwards, as he works from dawn to dawn, yet he is unable to achieve this financial success and happiness. Neni reveals this when she says, "SHE COULDN'T GO TO BED UNTIL HE GOT HOME; When she had called him around noon to find out how his day was going, he had hurriedly said it was going good, he couldn't talk, but everything was good. So she'd had no choice but to wait, and now, at almost midnight, she could finally hear him at the door" (MBUE, 2016, p. 17). This excerpt unveils the immigrant experiences in America as they seek for economic success. This excerpt highlights the stress and pressure under which these immigrants work. Working from morning to midnight, with no possibility to communicate with people on phone symbolises the mechanisation of these characters, who are forced by this capitalist system to work as machine in their pursuit to live the American Dream. Despite his hard work, he finally loses the job, and it is only when Jende loses his job that he becomes conscious of his miserable condition. This is seen when he asserts, "I lost my job. This work, work, work, all the time. For what? For a little money? How much suffering can a man take in this world... *Papier* is not everything. In America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how many people with papers are struggling. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country" (MBUE, 2016, p. 236). As seen above, this excerpt discloses Jende's disillusionment with the American Dream as all his hopes and aspirations have been shattered by the harsh realities in America. This is because he works so hard from dawn to dawn in his pursuit of a better life, yet unable to achieve success. Again, Jende's declaration has deconstructed the ideology that the legal status of an immigrant is the ultimate path to success in America. The fact that even Americans are suffering projects the fact that economic insecurity and financial instability is a general phenomenon in the United States, which touches everybody.

Jende finally expresses his profound pain and suffering, which demonstrates a disconnection between his expectations and the realities he lived. This is seen when he states, "I'm ready to go back home," he said... "I want to go back to Limbe."..."I don't want to stay in this country anymore."..."I don't like what my life

has become in this country. I don't know how long I can continue living like this, Neni. The suffering in Limbe was bad, but this one here, right now ... it's more than I can take." (MBUE, 2016, p. 235). Jende's lamentation exposes the profound emotional existential struggles and frustrations that immigrants face in their pursuit in fashioning a better life in the host country. In this citation, Jende compares his sufferings and pain experienced in Limbe to the current situation he faces in America. Unfortunately, the suffering he faces in America is rather more unbearable than was the case in Limbe. This, thus, unmasks the discord between the immigrant's expectations of a better life in America, judging from the harsh realities that welcomes them. This is what exposes their disillusionment as their realities challenges the American Dream which fails to offer the ideal life that the immigrants had hoped for as they are rather welcomed by persistent barriers, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation. All these and others, cause Jende to fall sick as, "his feet began to ache" (MBUE, 2016, p. 197). It is for this reason that Jende asserts frantically that he does not want to live in America anymore. His longing to return to Limbe which he considers as home implies that the hope of a better life has not been materialised as were his aspirations. Perceiving Limbe as 'home', interrogates the notion that success can only be got in America, and implies that true contentment can only be found once he returns to his roots. This section reveals the complexities and contradictions of the American Dream, resulting from economic hardship, racial discrimination, unemployment, harsh working conditions, persistent feeling of deportation and the psychology trauma that it comes with. Through this section, we have noticed that the American Dream can sometimes lead to a feeling despair and loss, forcing immigrants to start wishing of returning home so as to seek for ideal comfort and happiness. Jende's emotional, psychological and physical breakdown due to his disappointment implies that the promise of prosperity and success in America is not universally attainable and the cost of striving for it can be devastating.

The Return of the 'Dreamer' as a Survival Strategy

This section of the work examines how the return to one's country of origin, which most often, is interpreted as a sign of failure or

defeat, rather serves as an ideal means of survival strategy for most immigrants. The experience of most of the immigrant characters in this novel, especially the Jonga's family in America, challenges the conventional immigrant success narrative, thereby suggesting the difficult choice of returning to one's country of origin, now perceived as home by these immigrants in their zeal of reclaiming agency. This difficult decision to return home then becomes the sole possibility of these characters to preserve their dignity, cultural identity and hope in the face of numerous challenges in the host country.

Following Jende's harsh experiences in America, characterised by oppression, economic hardship, corruption, cruel immigration system, poverty, racism, and rejection, leading to his growing disillusionment with the American Dream, Jende decides to return home to his country of origin. This entails that, Jende has come to perceive America as a country which promises abundance leading to 'success' and 'happiness' but at the same time, fails to deliver these to most immigrants like himself. It is such awareness that forces Jende to take a radical stance; that of returning to his country. This is seen when he tells Neni:

...America is not all that; this country is full of lies and people who like to hear lies. If you want to know the truth I'll tell you the truth: This country no longer has room for people like us. Anyone who has no sense can believe the lies and stay here forever, hoping that things will get better for them one day and they will be happy. As for me, I won't live my life in the hope that someday I will magically become happy. I refuse to! (MBUE, 2016, p. 255)

By declaring that this country, no longer has room for people like them, Jende exposes the harsh reality of exclusion and marginalisation faced by the immigrants on daily. His realisation that America is full of lies, challenges the America's economic and social structures, revealing a failed system. From this stand, Jende's disappointment and disillusionment then serves as a

turning point, propelling him to take the decision of departing America to Cameroon, which to him is a chance to rebuild his life on his terms. His choice to reject a country full of lies, which he had failed to perceive when Vince first tried to enlighten him, represents a sort of self-realisation from an idealised American Dream of success and happiness. His decision to return, therefore, is far from being a kind of failure as most people like Neni will see, but rather the surest means to reclaim control over his life and redefines his sense of belonging and happiness. This is confirmed when Jende affirms that, "With the new exchange rate at six hundred CFA francs to a dollar, he would be returning home with close to ten million CFA francs, enough to restart his life... and a maid so his wife could feel like a queen. He would have enough to start a business, which would enable him to someday build a spacious brick house and send Liomi to Baptist High School..." (MBUE, 2016, p. 269). Jende does not only decide to return home, but he also plans how his life in Cameroon will be. Thus, he stops to pursuit the American Dream to embrace a new reality and lifestyle in his homeland, grounded in self-determination and community empowerment. The reality here is that money which seems insignificant in America is a huge sum which will permit him to start a life in affluence in his home. His plans; starting a business, sending Liomi to a good school, treating his wife like a queen, building a mansion, buying a car, demonstrate his desire to establish a stable and prosperous life for his family, which is based on the possibilities that exist in Cameroon. His main plan to accomplish this is to, "start his own business: Jonga Enterprises. His slogan would be "Jonga Enterprises: Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe." Maybe he'd own a couple of taxis or *benskins*. Or hire people to farm the eight acres of land his father had left for him in Bimbia. He could sell the food in the Limbe market and ship some of it abroad" (MBUE, 2016, *idem*). Jende's survival plans in his country, which revolve around trade, agriculture, and even the transport sector, highlights his zeal towards success at home. Again, this strategic plan challenges the conception that returning to one's homeland is a sign of defeat and failure. After deciding to return home and after drawing his plan towards success in Cameroon, 'Without any treatment, his back stopped aching'(MBUE, 2016, *idem*).

Conclusion

The paper therefore concludes that, the conception and consideration of diaspora lands as paradise flowing with milk and honey is a myth that is certainly unattainable by every African immigrant. This entails that, migrating to the United States of America is not forcibly a way out of poverty as many Africans-represented by Jende who thinks "America has something for everyone" end up failing. The 2008 financial crisis further exacerbated the challenges faced by the immigrants, making it even more difficult for them to achieve their dreams in America. We therefore propose that aspiring migrants should have a clear purpose for migrating and obtain adequate information concerning the socio-economic, political and immigration policies of the host country before they can move, in order not to become frustrated immigrants.

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