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## Discussing the migrant experience: From Dakolo and Darey's songs to Chika Unigwe and Abi Dare's Novels

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#### Abstract

This paper sought to investigate the migrant dream as presented in two African popular soul songs and two novels vis-a-vis the reality migrants face when they arrive at their destinations or new spaces. These popular songs are: Timi Dakolo's *Wish me well* and Darey's *Pray for me*. The novels are Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* and Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. The discussion attempts to draw comparisons between the migrant's dream versus the reality as explored in the songs and the novels. It is important to note that all two popular songs are written by men. The dreams and hope of migration that they present is in some ways a direct contrast to the realities female migrants face in the accounts of the two novels, *On Black Sisters Street* and *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, which are written by women. This paper intentionally focuses on migration within home spaces and migration outside home spaces, and such migrations are not embarked upon due to the reason of war or political displacement as often talked about by migration experts.

**Keywords:** displacement, migrant experience, migration, popular African music

#### Public Interest Statement

More often than not, when the issues surrounding migration is discussed, the lens focuses on migrants fleeing war or other forms of displacement. This research focuses on discussing the other kind of migrant whose sole purpose for migration is to meet social needs. As such this research makes a comparative analysis of the representation of migrant goals in African popular soul music written by two male musicians as against the migrant goals presented in two African novels written by females.

## Introduction

This article focuses on the similarities between willing migrants and forced migrants as well as the differences between the two. It is hoped that by the end of the discussion, the paper would have explored the migrant dream versus the migrant experience, as well as laid foundations for a future discussion on the role oppressors play in the migrant experience.

Migration is a much talked about issue on many platforms. From documentaries of migrants crossing through Morocco and Libya into Europe and news of migrants who embark on such dangerous crossings and never make it or end up spending years in immigration cells and deportation camps; as well as migrants migrating within their home spaces by leaving their country side origins and habitats for bigger cities. However, the challenges faced by these sojourners and the inevitable dangers they face due to the fact that they have ventured into the unknown does not deter others from embarking on such journeys. As such, the discussions surrounding migration can never be exhausted. In order to understand why some people, make the decision to migrate, there is the need to understand what migration is.

Oucho & Williams (2017) define migration as “the movement of people from their original habitat to a destination outside the borders of their origin, purposely to settle and can be voluntary or forced.” (p.2) Therefore, who is a migrant?

This research defines a migrant as someone, who for various reasons, decides to leave his or her original home or habitat or place of birth with the aim of resettling at a new place. Some of the reasons for migration are economic instability at the migrant’s home, displacement due to war, political unrest, family tragedies, personal loss of various kinds, educational pursuit, career pursuit, family reasons such as marriage, among others. In fact, the reason people migrate are numerous. Also, it is important to note that there are willing migrants and unwilling or forced migrants. A willing migrant is an individual who decides to embark on a journey based on his or her own personal convictions that it would serve a better purpose for him or her if he or she does so. As such, a willing migrant could be travelling to further his or her education, get married, start a new job or go in search of better financial/economic prospects.

Forced migrants/ unwilling migrants, on the other hand, migrate because they are being forced to do so due to circumstances beyond their control. Some of these circumstances could be war, political unrest, drought and famine, among others. However, whether one falls under the category of forced or willing migrants, both groups of migrants, more often than not, face challenges and opposition at the new spaces they find themselves. These challenges or opposition is referred to as the Oppressor. The oppressor is the one person or group of persons or the one system or bureaucracies standing between every migrant and his or her dream. Oppressors come in various forms. They could be immigration laws of the new place as recounted by writers such as Okey Ndibe, in his memoir, *Never look an American in the eye* (2016) and in his novel, *Foreign God, Inc.* (2014) or in Unoma Azuah’s novel, *Edible Bones* (2011).

## What is the reason for migration?

According to Flahaux & De Haas (2016):

Migration aspirations depend on people’s more general life aspirations and their

perceptions of the extent to which these aspirations can be fulfilled ‘here’ and ‘there’. Both these aspirations and perceptions about geographical opportunities are highly subjective and likely to change under the influence of social and cultural change. Improved access to information and exposure to other (wealthy and/or ‘Western’) lifestyles conveyed through education, media and advertising tend to change people’s perceptions of the ‘good life’ alongside increasing material aspirations and a growing appetite for consumer goods. (p. 4)

Flaux & De Haas (2016) exposition above reveal that reasons for migration go beyond the popular notion of displacement. People migrate for reasons other than war, starvation and political unrest among others. People’s personal aspirations and where they believe these aspirations could be met influences their migration decisions. It can also be inferred from Flaux & De Haas (2016) that the dynamics of lifestyle portrayed by the media as well as brushes with some semblance of western cultures and materialism can also be a factor why people migrate. And in fact, Timi Dakolo’s song, *wish me well*, presents this notion posited by Flaux & De Haas (2016).

In *Wish me well*, the reason a young man wants to migrate is so that he can fulfil his material dreams. According to the song writer, he is off to the city because: “I heard about life, life in the city, so that’s where all the dreams come true.” (Dakolo, 2015) The first line where the song writer says that he “heard about life” supports the argument by Flaux & De Haas (2016) of the influence of media and other forms of information access on people’s decision to migrate. It also supports the fact that the migrant in the song is not migrating based on displacement but is migrating based on material and social reasons. The material reason is evident in the things he hopes to get when he successfully migrates, and the social reason is evident in the hopeful change of his social standing if he successfully migrates. And these are evident in the following lines of the song:

I’m gonna be a famous super star  
I’m gonna drive a big old fancy car  
And fly my own plane all across the world (Dakolo, 2015)

The above lines of the song equally explain Oucho & Williams (2017) claim that migration is as a “result of lack of sustainable development or lack of access to much needed resources for development” (p. 13) in the migrant’s home community. A society with sustainable development will create the enabling environment for its citizens to grow their businesses and live a fairly comfortable life. In fact, this assertion by Oucho & Williams (2017) reaffirm what Flaux & De Haas (2016) delineate as the other reasons, other than displacement, as to why people migrate.

The other reasons other than displacement as to why people migrate is equally presented in Darey’s song, *Pray for me*, the song writer’s reason for migrating is not based on any form of social, economic or political displacement. Like Dakolo he has ‘heard about life in the city’ and wants to experience it. He believes that he would be better off in the city than he is in his father’s house in the countryside. Against his father’s wishes, he moves to the city. However, unlike Dakolo who talks of his expectations of city life, Darey just tells his father that: “I’ve got to take a chance.” (Darey, 2015) He does not give us a list of his material or social expectations, but he is

willing to take a chance with city life and he hopes that he will make it.

In fact, these men share a common reason for migration. And this common reason is the universal impulse for survival and the hunger for success. Basically, the reason for migration here is economic and social. Economic in the sense that these young men hope to improve upon their financial circumstances. Social in the sense that a better financial circumstance will make way for respectable status in the society. So far, the discussion has centred on male migrants and their reason for migration other than displacement. However, the question is—are the reasons for migration different for men and women?

In order to answer this question, one must not forget that the need for survival and success is a natural, universal human impulse. As such, women are no different. So for instance, in Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters Street*, Efe agrees to go to Belgium to work in the sex business. Her boss, Dele, who she cleans for, is going to pay for her passage into Belgium. When Efe tells her sister, Rita, about the trip, she says: "he says before I know it, before one year even, I'll be rich." (p.84) Efe, who has lost her mother and is now a teenage single parent, is travelling to Belgium because she needs to be able to provide for her daughter and her siblings. Migration to Europe offers the keys to her financial empowerment. It is interesting to note that whereas the young men are traveling on their own support and give no hint of compromising their self in order to survive as migrants, Efe, a young woman, will have to fall on her sexuality in order to gain the same economic empowerment that these young men are also aiming for.

However, there are differences in the reasons for migration as well. For instance, in Abi Dare's novel, *the girl with the louding voice*, Adunni, a young girl of fifteen, is forced to migrate because she is running away from her husband, Morofu (who is older than her father) and from the fact that Morofu's second wife, has died in her arms, with no witnesses, and she must explain how. And she has no way of explaining. Her mother, who would have defended her is dead. In fact, her mother's death is the main reason she marries Morofu because her father is not willingly to take up the sacrifice of her upbringing. Adunni recounts: "when mama was dead, a light off inside me. I keep myself in that dark for many months ..." (p.7) Adunni leaves the dark due to her younger brother's encouragement. But she leaves the darkness her mother's death has brought on her, only to be cast into a deeper darkness by her father who greedily and shamelessly marries her off to Morofu. Adunni's marriage to Morofu exposes her to the deceit and lies of Morofu's household and forces her to forge an alliance with her rival in marriage, Khadija. Adunni explains that: "with Khadija, the days in this house are short and sometimes sweet. We talk together, laugh together, ..." (p.53) But this alliance turns out to be the third darkness Adunni is thrown into when Khadija ends up dead. As such, Adunni must run away. She explains that she is "leaving Ikati. This is what I been waiting all my life, to leave this place and see the world outside is looking like, but not like this. Not with a bad name following me... I hang my head down, feeling a thick, heavy cloth as it is covering me. The thick cloth of shame, of sorrow, of heart pain." (p.111) This clearly implies that in as much as Adunni wishes to migrate to a place she believes would be better and help her fulfil her dreams of getting "a louding voice," she was not expecting to run away and leave in her wake a bad name.

This confirms the earlier exposition that not all migrants are willing migrants. Some, like Adunni, are forced to embark on migration based on varied factors beyond their control. Forced

migration is as a result of many diverse reasons or circumstances. Whereas some like Adunni are running away from something dreadful in their lives, others are bundled by force and sent to work. But for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on Adunni's type of forced migration. Adunni's type of forced migration will be considered as social displacement. Her connection to the death of Khadija and the concomitant consequences of imprisonment or probably even death at the hands of a cruel husband and a chauvinistic chief of the community, Adunni becomes socially displaced in her community and as such, must move on—in this instance, run away. Her father cannot help keep her away from the wrath of the chief and Morofu. Nobody will listen to her and believe her if she tells them that Khadija died because of her lover, Bamidele. Adunni explains that her father assures her that nothing bad: “will happen to me, but Papa make promise to Mama and he didn't keep the promise. How will he keep his promise now to save me from trouble?” (p.90) After taking into consideration her father's lack of gall, she decides that running away is her best option for self-preservation. But where is Adunni running to? Will her new and unfamiliar space provide the refuge she needs? So this leads to the question—is the migrant expectation met?

### **The Migrant's Expectation**

On arrival in the city and into the home of Big Madam, Adunni's expectations are not met. She finds life in the city (in the home of big madam) unbearable and unbelievable. First of all, Mr. Kola, the supposed good Samaritan who helps Adunni by bringing her to the city assures her that he will be keeping her salary for her and bring her the money after three months. But she learns from Kofi, the cook, that: “he told Rebecca the same thing. She believed him, and he collected all her salary and did not show up here again until this afternoon when he brought you.” (p.135) And true to Kofi's words, Adunni never see Mr. Kola again. She ends up working without remuneration for Big Madam. And to make matters worse, she is treated like a slave. For instance, Adunni recounts: “this is how I am doing work in Big Madam's house: every day, I must wash all toilets and baffrooms.” (p.143) And regardless of her toils in the house, Kofi informs her that: “Big Madam says she can only afford to feed you once a day.” (p.143) Now, when Kofi decides to give her breakfast because he thought that Big Madam was fast asleep, Big Madam walks in on them. Adunni recounts that on seeing her have breakfast, Big Madam “march to my front, collect plate and pour the rice on top my head. She snatch the boil egg, smatch it in the middle of my head.” (p.144)

Reading of Adunni's experience creates conflicting emotions of sadness and disappointment in the reader. But this is unfortunately, a small portion of the troubles a young woman who migrates under forced circumstances is likely to encounter. In fact, a similar instance can be sighted from *Black sisters street*. Joyce tells the other two women, Ama and Efe: “we are not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals.” (p.290). The ‘somebody else’ that they work as prostitutes to make rich, is Dele, the rich man in Lagos who paid for their passage into Belgium. Now, this conversation between the three women come in as a result of the news of Sisi's death. Sisi, who until her death was part of the group, was brought into Belgium by Dele to work as a prostitute, because Sisi is unable to get a job in Lagos after graduating from the university. However, Sisi soon realises that all the money she gets working in the sex trade goes to paying Dele. And as such she cannot be her own woman.

Meeting and falling in love with Luc affords her the courage to leave the house of prostitution. So when Sisi decides for the first time since she arrived in Belgium, not to send the money she worked for to her Boss, Dele, but to spend it on herself, the writer explains that: “for the first time in a long while she felt happy to be alive. No longer buffeted by indecision, she was at ease with the world. No more promises of happiness that crumbled and turned to dust under scrutiny. Today was the beginning of a brand-new life.” (p.284) But unfortunately for Sisi, her courage and determination to be her own person causes her death. Dele orders Segun to murder her. Segun kills her by hitting her skull with a hammer, and then: “dragged her out on to the deserted road leading to the GB, and pushed her into the boot of the car” (p.293)

These accounts of Adunni’s and Sisi’s experience are proof that the migrant expectation is not always met. In fact, the migrant expectation can be completely different from the reality that migrants encounter. And this is no different from the male experience with regard to expectations not met. For instance, Dare’s song shows that his expectations are not met when he arrives in the city. In the letter he writes to his father after struggling for four years in the city, he laments:

It was true what you said to me ha ha ha  
That life in the city is unbelievable ha ha ha ha  
Had to struggle just to get by everyday  
And I could barely find my way (Darey, 2015)

The above account from Darey, makes it clear that the migrant’s expectations are at variance with the migrant experience. And one major factor that leads to the shocking experiences migrants face is based on the presence of what this researcher chooses to refer to as the oppressor as earlier defined in the introduction. In Darey’s case, the Oppressor is the challenges of city life. Darey is new to city life and he does not make any preparation before going to the city. The first stanza of his song reveals that he just:

Woke up one Sunday morning  
Told my daddy I’m leaving home  
Going off to the city tomorrow  
Even though I don’t know where to go (Darey, 2015)

Then as the previous stanza quoted states, Darey realises that things are not as easy in the city as Dakolo makes it sound in *Wish me well* when he sings that the city is “where all dreams come true.” (Dakolo, 2015) So for Darey, his Oppressor manifests in the form of the difficulty in securing a job in the city due to many factors, the bills he must pay in order to keep a room as well as feed himself. Similarly, Adunni’s Oppressor is Big Madam and her husband, Big Daddy. Big Madam and her husband are synonymous with Dele in *On black sister street*. After all the beatings she receives at the hands of Big Madam, she also has to fight off Big Daddy who is bent on sexually molesting her:

His two hands are nailing me down now, trapping me under his body but I bite his

cheeks, taste the salt of his blood, the drink in his skin, and spit it on his face. I hear the snipping of his trouser zip. The grunt as he is pressing me down on the floor... My hand is dead. My legs are pinned down. How can I fight? (p.281)

This clearly reveals the agony Adunni goes through. But she cannot return home because she is running in order to save her life. The irony of the situation is embedded in the fact that in running away in order to save herself, she finds herself in even more dangerous and life-threatening situations. For instance, when Adunni serves Big Madam's guest and mistakenly drops the meat tray she narrates the violence with which Big Madam attacks her:

As I bend to pick the first meat, I feel a quick cold air, and something heavy landing on my head...my head is frying inside a fire, burning, burning, burning and I am thinking the ceiling have come down and crash on top my head, but when I look up, I see Big Madam. She is holding one leg of her red shoe, and before I say another one word, she smash the shoe right inside the middle of my head. (p.166)

It is in fact astonishing that Adunni survives this much violence and still receives more violence from Big Madam. But Adunni is not alone as a migrant dealing with the Oppressor. The women who work as sex workers for Dele and madam have these two (Dele and Madam) as their Oppressors. For instance, when Sisi arrives and Madam is introducing her to the intricacies of her new life as a sex worker, she tells her that: "now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organise this for you..." (p.182) Madam continues with a threat:

Now, until you have paid up every single kobo... every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back. Every month we expect five hundred Euros from you... every month you go to Western Union and transfer the money to Dele. Any month you do not pay up..." (p.183)

And Madam lets "the threat hang. (p.183) So when Sisi ends up dead because she refuses to pay the money and has also moved out of Madam's house, then the reader realises that Madam's threat were not empty after all. Because Sisi and the other women are migrants living and working illegally in Europe, one quickly assumes that their Oppressor would be perhaps, the back breaking immigration systems that makes it difficult for a migrant to stay legally. But in this instance, Sisi, Efe and the other women soon realise that their Oppressors are not the immigration laws, but two unscrupulous humans in the persons of Dele and Madam.

But notwithstanding the presence of oppressors who make life unbearable for the migrants in the chosen texts and songs, or how and for what reasons one migrates, the human impulse of hope is equally universal. And it is based on hope for a better future that migrants make their journey to new spaces. And even when one does not show it or speak it. In the deep recess of the mind, hope lingers. And it is from this place of hope, that during the journey to Lagos, when Mr. Kola tells Adunni that: "I hope Big Madam will be good to you." (p115) Adunni equally shares the same hope. The song writers, carry this same hope in their songs. As such, Timi Dakolo, sings that: "I gat no money, just hopes and dreams." (Dakolo, 2015) Darey also hopes. It is for this reason

that in his song, he replies his worried father: “I know I could get lost, I know I could get broken, but I’ve got to take a chance.” (Darey, 2015) Darey’s desire to still take a chance regardless of the odds, stems from the place of hope. Hope that things will get better. Hope that he can make it out there in the city.

## Conclusion

The migrant, either willing or forced, is hopeful. Even when forced, the migrant holds on to the hope of freedom one day. And this is evident in Efe and the other young women who are part of Dele’s prostitution ring in Belgium. For instance, Joyce hopes to return to Lagos once she finishes paying Dele and establish a boutique which she would call TOTT, “Talk of the town.” Even Sisi who ends up dead had hoped of freedom and enjoying her life with Luc. Therefore, even when the migrant is a willing participant in the migration process and experience, the migrant is equally hopeful of a brighter future. As such, in the song, *Wish me well*, Timi Dakolo is hopeful that his journey to the city will yield positive fruits. So he talks about being a super star in the future, buying a plane, traveling the world. Darey is equally hopeful of making it once he gets to the city. In fact, these songs are a mirror reflection of the psyche of the willing migrant. This is why the song reveals how the migrants are hopeful of the outcome of their journey to the city or to new places where they believe life would be much better. And willing migration comes as a result of the human instinct for survival, success and power. However, this research has also revealed that the problem migrants face arises as a result of the reality of the migrant experience. The migrant experience reveals that things are usually not what it seems. So we see that Darey waits four years before writing a letter back home to his parents. And by the time he writes to his parents, his mother has long been dead and buried. Darey’s letter reveals his struggles in the city. Even as a willing migrant, Darey finds life difficult. It is difficult for him to survive. This paper reveals how Darey’s experience is a sublime reverse mirror reflection of what the forced migrant experience looks like. As such, this reverse mirror reflection is evident in the novel, *the girl with the louding voice*, and it is why the reader becomes a witness to the horrors of Adunni’s experience in the house of Big Madam. She eats once a day. She is beaten if she makes a mistake as ordinary as not showing up the minute she is summoned by Big Madam. Big daddy also tries to rape her. Whereas Adunni is sexually molested by her husband, Morofu, and later sexually attacked by her master, Big Daddy, the women *On Black Sisters Street*, are forced into the sex trade, working for a man back home in Nigeria. In fact, it is evident from the texts that in as much as male and female migrants could face the same forms of challenges, female sexuality tends to make female migrants more vulnerable in many ways, therefore setting some variation between male and female migrant experiences.



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