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Decoding Migration: History, Sea and, Middle Passage in Exodus by Gbenga Adeoba

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Abstract

The concept of migration is as old as human history. Humans have been migrating since ages thereby, giving birth to nations, cultures, geographies, communities and societies. Like any other society, African societies have also been participating in all these sometimes forced and sometimes voluntary migrations. One such moment that has defined African societies outside Africa is the Middle Passage that lasted from early sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. During this fateful era, millions of Africans were abducted from their homes and were relocated to the new world. This history has been repeating itself from the second half of the twentieth century when again Africans have been migrating to Europe, during what I term as New Passage, but this time voluntarily. Unfortunately, this process is continued till date with slight variation. The present paper tries to answer the following questions with reference to *Exodus* by Gbenga Adeoba:

1. How Adeoba handles history and migration in an African context?
2. How Adeoba conceptualizes the Old Passage and the New Passage with regard to African history of migration?
3. What role does the Sea play as motif and symbol in Adeoba's poems?

Key Words: Exodus, Migration, African Poetry, Middle Passage, Mediterranean Crossing, Sea Imagery.

Introduction

Exodus, 2020, by Gbenga Adeoba, is part of a well-known contemporary series known as the Book of African Poetry series published by

University of Nebraska Press, and edited by Kwame Dawes. The book contains as many as twenty-nine poems. Adeoba, within the span of seventy-eight pages, deals with migration, home, exile, nation, hope, life, death, dreams

and violence. These poems are lyrical and argumentative at the same time. These poems question the very basic notion of globalization and cosmopolitanism for the poor and persecuted in Africa. Adeoba vividly examines both home and homelessness and makes his readers visualize the trauma and torture of moving and leaving behind. He paints vivid and graphic images of Africans migrating, drowning, shouting for help, floating as dead bodies, walking with dreams and hope, victimized by time and history, both succinctly and comprehensively. Within the short space of less than hundred pages, Adeoba connects past and present, time and space, life and death, Africa and Europe to argue that history is cyclic and time is nonlinear. The aim of the present paper is to argue how Adeoba handles history and migration in an African context by presenting twenty first century Middle Passage as nothing, but replica of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Middle Passage. I would argue that Adeoba revisits the earlier Middle Passage to contextualize modern day crossing of the Ocean by the Africans. I would also argue that how in this process of history repeating itself, the Ocean emerges as living entity, a motif and symbol rather than just providing a background. There are two main ocean roots to Europe from Africa used by the migrants, chiefly from West Africa to Europe through Atlantic from the coast of Senegal from where, Migrants reach Canary Islands and go on to Spain and continue their onwards journey. The second route is from North Africa via the Mediterranean from the coast of Libya from where migrants reach Sicily and Lampedusa which take them to main land Italy or sometimes migrants enter into Europe through Malta via the same route. Both the crossings are arduous and scary, my focus here is on the sea route from Libya to Italy and for clarity I would address it as the New Passage and the historical Middle Passage as the Old Passage to demonstrate historical continuity. To accomplish this, I have divided my argument in three parts. Part one focuses on migration in

general and global context to provide larger context to my arguments. Part two situates migration in African context where I explain both the old and new passages to demonstrate historical continuity. Likewise, the third part concentrates on Adeoba's poems for specific examples.

Migration in Global Context:

As Tom Casteel in his famous book *Human Migration* puts it, "Although other species travel, humans are master migrators. Since our origin as a species some 200,000 years ago, humans have been on the march. Human migration refers to the movement of people from one place to another. No other creature has trekked so far or inhabits so many different types of environments," (2). Casteel proposes four types of migration. The first is Home Community migration where people migrate within their native country for education, job, wedding as well as health related issues. The second type is Whole Community migration where the entire community moves from one place to another as was the case in hunter gatherers societies where for food, water and greener pastures, the entire group would relocate from time to time. The third kind, as suggested by Casteel is that of Cross Community migration where individuals or families leave their motherland and arrive in some other nation for either job, education or to avoid political and cultural persecution. The fourth type, as Casteel puts it, is that of colonial migration where one community comes and displaces another community or starts its domination by bringing its culture and other means of oppression. The prime example of this category, as Casteel records is the making of the United States of America where Europeans came and displaced natives to form a new country all together.

Likewise, social scientist Michael Samers in his book *Migration*, divides migration into three categories. For Samers the first type is National and International migration. National

migration is where anyone migrates within one's own country like from village to city, one city to another city or small town to a metro city for job, education, better health and social infrastructure. Whereas, International migration is where one moves out of one's nation state into any other country for any reason and decides to stay there. The second type, as Samers continues is Documented and Undocumented migration. Documented migration is where one migrates into any country legally with a valid passport and visa. On the other hand, Undocumented migration is where anyone enters in any country illegally without being noticed or one overstays beyond the permitted time as per the official visa. The third type, as Samers relates it is Forced and Voluntary migration. Forced migration is where one is forced by circumstances which are above one's control like persecution, ethnic cleansing, ecological disasters, civil war and political oppression. While, Voluntary migration is where one leaves one's place with free will and there is no threat of either death or torture. This may happen because of economic and medical opportunities or better living conditions offered by any other place.

African Context:

African societies from the seventeenth century till date have been participating in this third category proposed by Samers where first they were forced out of their continent into the new world during the Middle Passage and colonial occupation of Africa from late nineteenth century onwards. Once the freedom was gained from the second half of twentieth century, Africans started to migrate to the Western world for better education and employment opportunities. Additionally, they had to escape genocides, civil wars, droughts, political persecution, poverty, corruption and wide spread system of inequality because of extreme brutal military dictatorships, vulnerable democracies and persistent terrorist attacks. African literature is inundated with examples of migration from Africa to Europe or

the United States, as Anna-Leena Toivanen argues in, "Globalisation, Mobility and Labour in African Diasporic Fiction," "Mobility is a theme that has intrigued African writers for decades. Bernard Dadié's *Un nègre à Paris* (1959) is one of the first African authored travelogues featuring the figure of the African tourist; Aké Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* (1960) addresses African student mobility; Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) discusses migration from African women's perspective; and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) represents the coerced displacement of asylum seekers. Mobility is commonly explored more generally through the migrant experience despite the fact that migration and mobility are often motivated by problems of access to adequately remunerated labour" (47). Adeoba is no exception in this regard. One finds both Old and New Passages being emotionally and critically represented in his poetry. Before delving deep in Adeoba's poem from the perspective of migration and history, it is first pertinent to understand in detail the concept of the Old Passage and the New Passage.

The Old Passage:

As Michael Fisher in his book *Migration: A World History* argues, "One of the most numerous and destructive forced migrations directly caused by European colonialism was the brutal exportation of approximately twelve million Africans as slaves across the Atlantic. Up to one-third of these unwilling emigrants died aboard or soon after sale in the Americas. Of the survivors, about five million were sold in Brazil, three million in British North America and the Caribbean, and one-and-a-half million in Spanish America," (88).

As Lerone Bennett Jr. in *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1962*, postulates that the history of black America begins in 1619 when first lot of African captives embarked on the shore of James Town, but the forced migration of the Africans had started in 1440s when Portuguese had

ambushed innocent Africans in their home in West Africa. Bennett opines that for four hundred years, European cupidity forced approximately 40 million Africans out of their home countries into new world, something Bennett names as "the greatest migration in human history" (28).

As historian Ira Berlin in *The Making of African America*, proposes that the Middle Passage was the most destructive segment of African history that not only shaped the identity of the Africans into African Americans but also brought native Africans into the new world and changed them forever. She opines that the Middle Passage, actually, started from the heart of coastal areas of the West Africa. Prior to the slave trade, Europeans used to import gold and ivory from Africa, but with the onset of plantation economy, gold and other commodities were replaced by human cargo. Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, there was huge demand of tobacco, cotton, sugar, rice, tea and coffee in the European markets. This demand needed persistent supply to cater this growing need of the European consumers. This was impossible without massive production. Therefore, as Bennett puts it, Africans proved to be most economical and desired as field workers instead of indentured whites and native Americans because former was protected by law of their motherland and the latter was resistant to the idea of slavery in their homeland and would run away easily. European need and greed were instrumental in channelizing the flow of human cargo towards the new world where the land was fertile, and whites and native Americans were either reluctant or totally unavailable to plant and plough. As Berlin continues, people were kidnapped and were brought on what maritime historian Marcus Rediker in *The Slave Ship: A Human History* terms as "floating dungeons" (38). As M. K. Logan argues that Portuguese were the first in this plunder of human cargo. They had brought a small group of Africans to Lisbon as early as

1441. Later, other European countries like England, France, Spain and Netherland also jumped in order to gain maximum of profit in African importation to the new world colonies. As historian Kevin Shillington in his book *History of Africa*, remarks that human importation from Africa to the new world reached from few hundred people per year in early sixteen hundreds to few thousands per year in late eighteenth century. Africans were handcuffed and dragged from the interior to the coast where they were kept in the slave pens until their time had arrived. Deprived of any connection from their motherland, as Berlin remarks, the slave catchers branded and fettered them below decks where they would suffer and die because of lack of space, stench of sweat and urine. The passage from the slave port in Africa to the new world, lasted from four months to six months, depending on the time in history from early sixteenth century to the eve of Civil-War in the United States. Once on the Ship, the captive could not help their fate. Men and boys, as Berlin contends, were mostly kept below decks whereas, women and girls were allowed much freedom and mobility. On the Slave Ship, as Rediker explains, the ship captain unleashed absolute cruelty. It was his state and he ruled it with absolute thumb. Flogging, as Berlin maintains, along with rapes, endless beating, fetters, thumb screws were some of the most common tools of oppression. Any retaliation from below was considered blasphemy and was crushed without mercy. The Slave Ship, as Rediker records, left a trail of carcasses, providing soft and easy target for the sharks. As the ship would approach the harbors in the new world, as Berlin sustains, the captain and crew would relent a bit in their treatment of the captives. They wanted to gain maximum profit on the ports in the new world, as they were instructed by their investors in Europe and the United States, they would present their human cargo in most artificial manner possible in a given context. Despite all this, as Berlin concludes, as the Ship neared its harbor in the Caribbean or the United States, one fourth of its

captives would be dead. This was so because of malnourishment, jumping over board, torture inflicted on the Ship, organized or unorganized revolts. Consequently, the only way the captives could possibly achieve moral victory was by sacrificing their lives thereby, defying the traders of what they had desired.

The New Passage:

As Simon Massey and Rino Coluccello in *Eurafrican Migration: Legal, Economic and Social Responses to Irregular Migration*, argue that in the global context, the rate with which people have been migrating either by land or sea has increased in last five decades. This trend, as they argue, is specifically visible in the Mediterranean where through Libya, Africans try to enter Italy. In order to substantiate their point, they quote the report of the United Nations High Commission of Refugees, U.N.H.C.R., that in 2014 alone approximately 348000 people tried entering Europe where 207000 tried through sea route via the Mediterranean to resist poverty, joblessness, persecution and other kinds of tortures. These migrants, often take highly risky route, they are exploited on the way by human traffickers and coast guards alike. Most of the times, their boats are overcrowded and are in miserable conditions. They pack themselves and their loved ones with hope, dreams and desires. They come from all over Africa like: Nigeria, Mali, Togo, Niger, Somalia, Kenya, Congo, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Their journeys often last for many months. They may reach their desired country or they may perish on the way.

Monica Massari in her article, "At the Edge of Europe: the Phenomenon of Irregular Migration from Libya to Italy," points that after Arab Spring in 2010 and spread of the revolution to north Africa, the official and unofficial number of regular and irregular migration to Europe from sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa and the horn of Africa increased many folds. She argues that in the year 2014 alone, people entering Italy mostly the islands of Sicily and Lampedusa via the Mediterranean

from the coast of Libya was unimaginable. She continues that more than 3000 migrants died during the passage in the same year itself. Massari records that from 1988 to 2014, around 21000 migrants died while crossing the Mediterranean. These migrants also have similar kind of horrible experiences like their predecessors who had crossed the Atlantic throughout seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These migrants, like their predecessors, survive the holocaust of this new passage in slightly different, but almost similar way like that of their ancestors. The most difficult stage for these migrants, as Massari argues, is the trauma of seeing their own people drowning in front of themselves helplessly. This would later haunt the survivors when they would try to somehow gather their life in Europe.

Massari identifies two possible roots of this New Passage to Europe. She observes that migrants usually take either the Western route or the Eastern route. Those who hail from Western African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mali, Togo and Niger etc first gather in Agadez in Niger. Massari relates that from Agadez there are two possible ways to get to Libya. Migrants either travel on foot through mountains and risk constant attacks by robbers and animals. From this route, their journey lasts for many weeks to many months and tired and worn-out, they finally arrive in Tripoli via Sabha after crossing treacherous desert. Some migrants who have some money, as Massari continues, take either truck ride or any other heavy vehicle and cross the desert and arrive in Tripoli risking Sandstorm, robbers and malnutrition. The Eastern route as Massari points out, is from Sudan to Libya. Migrants coming from the horn of Africa usually gather in Khartoum, capital of Sudan and start their journey. Migrants from countries like: Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea take this route. From Khartoum, these migrants like their Western counterparts either go on foot or through pick-up trucks depending on the

amount of money they can spare for this. From here also, they have to cross the desert to arrive in Libya. Additionally, these migrants are constantly under attack by robbers, animals and demanding geographic conditions. When these migrants arrive in Libya, they are made to stay in small huts near the coast. Migrants, as Massari puts it, remain mostly under covered to protect themselves from coast guards and local militia. Sometimes they have to wait in hiding for many months for favorable circumstances. Their journey from Libya to Italy takes place on a boat. When weather is conducive and boats are ready, these migrants come out and under the cover of night, are put on dilapidated boats. Most of the times, one or two migrants are selected for the job of a Pilate and are provided very basic training. These pilots are not supposed to give any money for their journey and can take two or three friends and family members free of cost along with them whereas, others are forced to pay heavy amount for their passage.

Massari records that these boats are ruff and unseaworthy most of the times and migrants are left to depend on their luck or their own instincts to navigate for themselves. Their journey on the Mediterranean lasts from couple of days to couple of weeks, without necessary skills to survive in water, with very limited provisions, these migrants arrive in Italy to start their life from scratch. Many a times, they perish on their way which as Massari argues is more likely and most frequent. Massari informs that in 2013, 335 migrants drowned on the shore of Sicily and in 2014, a boat carrying 350 migrants capsized before entering in Italian waters. Italy for the migrants, as Massari concludes, is both destination and transit country from where migrants move towards England, France, Netherland and Germany. The entire passage from home to host nation, as Massari concludes is organized by human traffickers, Go-betweens, agents and local guards who not only exploit the migrants of their little belongings but

also of their dignity and humanity by torturing them sexually and emotionally.

However, as Derek Lutterbeck and Cetta Mainwaring in their article "The Eu's 'Soft Underbelly'? Malta and Irregular Immigration," relate that Italy is no doubt the most desired transit destination for the Africans migrating to Europe via sea, but Malta, a small Island near Italy also provides transit. As Lutterbeck and Mainwaring continue that after 2011, during the disturbance in North Africa because of Arab spring and instability in Libya after the regime change in post Gaddafi era when Italy introduced strong measures to combat illegal migration with the help of Libyan forces, Malta became a transit that Sub-Saharan Africans tried, but without much success as Lampedusa in Italy remain most favorite till date, as one article published on AfricaNews.com on 13 August, 2024 relates that nearly 7000 migrants arrived in last 24 hours on southern Island of Lampedusa which created almost panic like situation on an Island where there are only 450 beds vacant for the migrants on the said date and the overall population of the island is approximately 6000, just few hundred short of the new arrivals. The report further quotes Andrea Costa, the president of Baobab Experience, a non-profit association, that helps the migrants transit in Rome, that this summer there is clear surge in migrants coming from Sudan, South Sudan and Eritrea. Likewise, a report published on 19 September, 2023 on Npr.Org by Ruth Sherlock informs that Italy is left bewildered as 10000 North African migrants embarked in one week on the resort island, Lampedusa. Sherlock writes that this tiny island is just 120 miles away from North Africa that it is most desired transit point into Europe for Africans coming from either the coast of Tunisia or Libya.

Similarities and Dissimilarities:

On the surface, the Old Passage and the New Passage look categorically dissimilar. First, they are divided by time, the former transpired

from the fifteenth to nineteenth century whereas, the latter began in the second half of twentieth century and continues till date. Secondly, the former was forced, Africans were abducted from their homes and were brought to the new world. While the latter also remains forced because the migrants decide to leave when there are no other alternatives left, yet, at the same time, it is voluntary. Thirdly, in the Old Passage, Africans were brought to north, central and south America whereas, in the New Passage, Africans come to Europe. Fourthly, in the Old Passage, Africans, after arriving in the new world, were converted into chattel slaves whereas, in the New Passage, Africans become either refugees or asylum seekers and low paid wagers. Fifthly, in the former, Africans had no option of returning back to Africa after arrival whereas, in the latter, Africans are sometimes deported or they themselves can go back if they so desire. Sixthly, during the Old Passage, Africans were brought to American and Caribbean plantations because Europeans wanted to make more money by exploiting Africans whereas, in the New Passage, Africans move out of Africa to Europe as they want to upgrade their life both socially and financially. Seventhly, during the Old Passage, Africans traveled in proper Shipping vessels designed for the same purpose whereas, in the New Passage, Africans cross the ocean on unseaworthy, dilapidated fishing boats where they remain unprotected from the elements of the sea. Eighthly, during the previous passage, the time taken from African coast to American coast was four to six months depending on which phase of development was one traveling whereas, in the current phase, from African coast to Either Malta or Italy, it takes maximum ten to fifteen days if sea is calm and winds are favorable.

Despite all the dissimilarities, there are many layers that cut across both the passages. In both the cases, Africans suffered the most. In both the stances, Africans had to leave their motherland. In both the cases, Africans had to dislocate and start from the scratch in hostile

surroundings. In both the cases, Africans are made butt of laughter and stereotyped into racist categories. On both the occasions, sea crossing proved to be fatal. In both the cases, push and pull factors were determined by the West. In the first case, it was slave trade and in the second case, it is neo-colonialism where the demand of cheap workforce in the developed nations is endless and for that it is important that global south in general and in our case, Africa in particular, must remain in instability which is surely the result of mismanagement of the continent by the colonizers and which is visible in post-colonial era in the form of civil wars, genocides and natural calamities. In both the cases, one finds that migration was organized on both the African and the Western side. In both the cases, it is impossible to provide the real number of casualties.

Adeoba in his poetry collection *Exodus* presents both these passages in myriad ways. His tackling of the subject of trans-continental migration is topical and relevant in the twenty-first century as countless number of Africans are migrating via sea route almost daily in their desperate effort to upgrade their lives. Consequently, one comes across Africans both during the Old and New Passages, interacting and are interacted upon by the sea. During the Old Passage, they were captives and would often finish their journey below the deck. Their interaction with the sea was very short and depended on many things including the weather. They were brought for a brief duration for exercise on the deck and some other physical activities like dancing, most of the time, in order to avoid any insurrection, they were kept in chains and below the deck, hence their response to the sea was less physical and more metaphorical. Contrary to this, during the New Passage, Africans travel in open and unseaworthy boats. They negotiate with the sea directly and with more involvement. They have to navigate their own way and have to fight the elements without any expert training, hence their response towards the sea during the New

Passage, is more physical and less metaphorical. As one reads Adeoba's poems, one comes across multiple ways in which the sea is represented.

Sea as Graveyard:

The very first image of the sea that one observes as one reads Adeoba's poems is that of the sea as a graveyard. For example, in "Middle Passage an Unreported Shipwreck Circa 1761" Adeoba presents sea as a burial ground for the captives and crew members alike. He presents a vivid and graphic account of a shipwreck that was never talked publicly. This poem is a stark reminder that the old passage was equally fatal for both Europeans and Africans alike. The speaker in the poem begins with a quote from the Bible:

Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives (23)

The speaker contrasts the shipwreck in Act 27 in the New Testament with that of eighteenth-century shipwreck and provides an ironical juxtaposition. The shipwreck mentioned in the Bible and quoted above had Paul as protagonist. When Paul was taken from Caesarea to Rome for trial, his ship was caught in stormy winds and all the people on board remained in unpredictable situation for fourteen days until they all saw land and were saved by Paul's faith. Their ship was sailing in Mediterranean and met with an accident near modern day Malta. It is the same path and same fate that contemporary migrants take except, they start from Libya instead of Israel and they end up drowning in the ocean most of the times when their boat is capsized. The contrast gets heightened when one reads the poem and realizes that hardly anyone survived these shipwrecks during the Old Passage throughout sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The poem opens abruptly, "It was nothing like a trainee sailor's imagination / of the sea or the infirmity of rudders" (23).

The narrator begins the description with sense of wonder and bewilderment. There is hint of impending disaster. The sense of precariousness is strengthened in the next set of lines, "But it got darker there in that lackluster region / where the vessel, coasting, tuned out of Zanzibar" (23). The speaker situates the scene in the exact geographical location in East Africa. The image of a slave ship sailing out of Zanzibar comes flashing in front of the readers. One imagines dark and sinister day with waves and wind pretending to be quiet. The narrator does not waste much time in reporting the scene as it unfolds. One realizes that as the vessel is about to sink, therefore the narrator wants to report before everything submerges in the depth of sea. The speaker informs that the winds were singing the music of ruin and the entire ambience was horribly ominous. The crew had thought that only a slave or two would become the casualty and all will be well, but it proved to be otherwise. The speaker refers to David Livingston who went missing for many years in East and West Africa to impart sense of history and sublimity to the entire enterprise of slave trade. He relates the overall loss of European objects like rum and musical instruments which were to be bartered on the next port for more slaves.

Finally, the narrator delivers the punchline and laments, "No daily had enough room for this loss" (23). Only at this point, the speaker remembers that he has not spoken anything about the Africans hoarded below deck. Our speaker, like Western historians, talks about Africans in the end, but unlike Western historians, he imparts dignity to the Africans by recording their manner of going down with fortitude. He remarks that it seems as if they were undeterred by what was happening around them. They accepted their fate and went with sense of victory. It was, usually, a common belief among the captives on the slave ships that if they would drown in African waters near their homeland, they would be born among their people again. The speaker in the poem is well

aware of this that's why he tells it the way he observes it:

those slaves huddled in the ship cell as a cluster, singing, knitting their singsong into the thick of that hurricane. (23)

In this way, singing and comforting each other, they went down in the sea and history. It would not be an exaggeration to say that sea claimed them forever. All those, drowned thus were buried, without any ceremony, in their watery graves in the ocean.

Sea as a Stage:

The second role that the sea performs in Adeoba's poetry is that of a stage. In, "Eclipse at a Slave Port in Dahomey, Old Benin Republic," Adeoba represents the sea as a stage on which the action of the old passage unfolded. The poem is written from the point of view of the African captives below the deck. The Africans are waiting for signs of movement, but the ship is standing still. There is a sense of anxiety among the captives. They are growing restless because of suffocation and stench. Adeoba paints the image of frozen ship thus:

All night, they had waited for the captain's blast—an initiation into a ritual, piercing as a dark prophecy—so that the ship would sail away from the piers into a future unfolding in fetters. (24)

The captives remain in state of anticipation throughout this short poem. They keep wondering about what is happening above whereas, there is hardly any hint thrown by the sailors and the captain. After detailing the mood below the deck, the speaker focuses on the sea thus:

There seemed to be an urgency on the sea, a rhythm of narrowness, and it was unlike the tune they had learnt (24)

The speaker argues that the mood outside was no different from the mood inside. There is stillness and sense of impending disaster lurking everywhere. The captives below deck remain suspended in mid-air, torn from their friends and family, they are thrown into the world of perplexities and precariousness. These captives have been captured from various ethnic background therefore, they find it impossible even to talk. They share their silence as common thread to communicate their dreams, fears and misgivings with one another. The narrator records their helplessness thus:

Held within the crevices of each ripple were tossed dreams, rehearsed scenes and unheard songs, the lexicon of memory and wisdom told in Bariba, Fon, and Fula. (24)

The captives remain in this state of limbo waiting for the ship to move in the "pocket of the sea" (24). The speaker informs that they had learned to communicate through their bodies and whispers despite linguistic barriers. The sea outside and the scene inside below the deck remain ironically calm. The stage is set. The superstitious captain is waiting for the eclipse to be over so that he can sail back to the new world with his human cargo. The narrator turns the tables upside down when he presents white captain as superstitious whereas, the Western discourse was that Africans are uncivilized and superstitious that's why they need enslavement and importation to the Christian world. Thus, the sea here proves to be a stage where superstitions of the captain and patience and resilience of the captives gets manifested.

Sea as Background:

Thirdly, one observes when one carefully reads Adeoba's poems that the sea also provides background for larger human actions. Adeoba in "Pa Cudjo Lewis Weaves a Song" presents sea as formidable background whose lurking presence determines the direction of

conversation. The poem is about Cudjo Lewis who was one of the captives on the very last slave ship named Clotilda in 1859 that had reached the United States of America illegally, under the cover of night as international slave trade had already been abolished long back. Cudjo had extremely difficult and painful life in the United States after emancipation. He had six children who had all died before his own eyes. So much so that, his wife also died before him, leaving him alone to face the battle of life. He was instrumental in establishing Africatown with other survivors of Clotilda. Initially, the newly freed slaves wanted to go back to Africa as they had arrived in the new world only six years back and most of their family member and friends would have been alive. Unfortunately, their plan to go back failed and they had to stay in the United States. With the passage of time, Cudjo became the stuff of legends and memory.

In the poem, the narrator talks about Cudjo who is narrating his on tale of suffering and sorrow to his grand-daughters Mary and Martha. While telling this tale, his voice chokes and shivers. He fondly remembers his home town in Benin. In his memory, Sea remains in the background. He does not refer to it back and forth he remembers vividly how he was brought to in Alabama via sea. He even does not spend much time describing the entire scene. It seems as if he is running from describing the entire episode. His expressions, no doubt, are succinct, but his narration is quite fast. He turns from one image to another in his mind. The narrator presents Cudjo's nostalgia thus:

He reimagines Bante,
that far home, now,
the unfurling of songs
and riddles told on ledges,
the tongues of fire. (25)

The narrator provides a peep into the mind of Cudjo. One feels his pain and loss as one reads along. He ends the description of past as soon as he arrives at the point of ship boarding. Here also, the narrator does not slow down to let

reader visualize the entire scene. Maybe Cudjo does not want to rethink that horrible event in detail and the speaker does not want Cudjo to suffer more. He runs through the scene of capture and ship boarding thus:

herded through tunnels of green,
through Abomey and Ouida,
to a two-masted schooner
perched on the waters
like a bird in rest. (25)

The very mentioning of the schooner is enough as it brings the memory of torture and sorrow on the slave ship during the transit. After this the narrator focuses on the present where Cudjo is getting restless and uncomfortable just by thinking about the sea and ship. In this way, the sea and slave ship remain in the background whereas, Cudjo talks more about his wife, children and friends in the United States.

Sea as Directory:

Fourthly, one notices the sea as a book where all the records related to all the mishappening on the sea is safely preserved for the posterity. For example, in, "A Short Essay on Drowning Where a Freed Slave Visits Zong Massacre," Adeoba presents the sea as a directory where the record of drowned Africans is safely preserved. The narrator revisits this horrible episode of history to pinpoint that that sea became a record book that unflinchingly secured the people forever who had died either by jumping over the slave ship consciously or who were drowned by force by the slavers during sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Old Passage. Zong massacre took place in 1781 near the Caribbean Island of Jamaica in which approximately 130 African men and women were thrown overboard by the captain and his crew because there was deficit of drinking water. The narrator who happens to be one of 208 Africans who had survived the massacre remembers thus:

that voyage across the Atlantic,
from Accra to Black River,
Jamaica, circa 1781 (29)

As the narrator is one of the survivors of the massacre and is trying hard to manage with his memory and emotions, his account is broken and without any coherence. He keeps shifting in his narration from one line of thought to another. Without following any pattern or without providing any background of his voyage, He begins his narration quite abruptly:

With eyes that have known
abysses, ruin, and the soft,
untold ways of water,
he would search the sky
and its mileage of lights for a star or two. (29)

The speaker recalls that he could have been one of those who were massacred and would have known the ways of sea from within, but, instead, he escaped that disaster and now he can gaze skywards and reflect on his fate. Later in the poem, he provides the actual detail of that fateful departure and arrival. His eye witness account imparts credibility to the whole scene. In reality, there was a trial where the insurance company had denied to pay any money to the captain and his investors. As per the law of the land, death by suicide or murder by the captain and crew was not to be counted for compensation. If the African had died by accident or the elements of the sea, the money was to be paid only then. In the historical trial, there was no African involved and questioned in this regard. This had always remained one sided. The narrator fills that gap and provides eyewitness account to the whole massacre. He was there when it all happened and he had seen it unfolding from his limited space below the deck. He blurts rather painfully:

So we are thinking of lives,
in aggregates, beyond digits:
The 208 slaves
that made it to Black River. (29)

So much so that, he provides day by day details of the killing to provide more authenticity:

Those 54 women and children
begging to be spared, screaming
into that November dark.
The drowned men, too –
79 in all,
names hidden
in the directories of the sea. (29)

The narrator not only provides the missing perspective by speaking from the side of the captives, but also affirms the role of sea as a record keeper of everything that the West tried to hide. Here, sea is not at all passive, but an active entity that preserved everything that was not reported on land. In this way, the speaker retells history from the perspective of those who were kept below the deck in fetters and neglected in all the discourses in the new world.

Sea as Bias Historian:

Fifthly, one observes sea in Adeoba's poems is a bias historian. In "Resurrection Along the Cost of Northern Africa," the speaker blames the Sea of being partial in his approach towards the drowned and washed on shore. The speaker who happens to be a migrant who could not make it beyond the ocean, imagines a situation where he is surrounded by the curious people. They ask him various questions regarding his failed attempt. This is how he begins the poem:

On the fortnight of your return,
they would bunch around the evening
fire to learn of your resurrection. (10)

The speaker does not inform the readers about the manner of his return. It is quite possible that his boat capsized and he swam back whereas many of his fellow migrants drowned. It is also likely that either he was turned back by Libyan coast guards or Italian rescuing Wessels. Whatever is the situation, the speaker thinks that he will be telling his heroic arrival to his audience and about his initial journey of crossing the desert in a truck where

he had witnessed half emptied towns and trampled dusty pathways, telling the stories of no return, to his future listeners. It is in this imagined story telling session, he blames the Sea of being a bias historian who only tells the history and story of only those who make it to the other side of ocean. He even juxtaposes himself with Lazarus in the holy Bible who was brought back to life by Jesus Himself. This sublimates the position of our speaker to mythical heights, as he was also perhaps taken to be dead or gone forever by his family and friends. This is how he presents his position:

How the sea beyond keeps no record
of the drowned and those it washed
ashore, how you, too, are a Lazarus of
the sea. (10)

Sea as Faithless:

Sixth image of the sea that one comes across in Adeoba's poem is that of sea as betrayer of dreams and desires. In "Seafarers," one observes the sea as someone who crushes the hopes and aspirations of the African migrants. The opening lines of the poem are self-evident in this regard:

The refrain of this water
says something is imminent,
says loss is upon us. (11)

The speaker provides highly poetic and serene setting to the poem. The boat of the migrants is in the middle of the Mediterranean and the sea seems calm after gulping some of the migrants and their dinghies. The speaker who happens to be one of the occupants of these worn-out boats records lyrically:

Bordered by kelp –
brown murals supple as wool –
and a cloud of winged witnesses,
our boat is somewhere
in the middle of the Mediterranean,
miles and miles from the coast
near Tobruk in Libya. (11)

The scene seems quite exotic and romantic. The atmosphere is pristine, but only

for some time. In the second half of the poem, the speaker breaks the dream like situation and shatters all illusions. The migrants have to face hard times as they encounter shattered boats and floating dead bodies. These are the bodies of those who had tried crossing the ocean and perished in their attempt. These are unsung heroes and martyrs to their own dreams, people who are converted into catalogue of how many died by drowned while crossing the Mediterranean in so and so year. Unfortunately, during the New Passage, it is not uncommon to come across sailing bodies and floating boats on the coasts of Malta and Italy. The speaker informs with horror and grief:

There are dismembered boat parts,
whole dinghies, too,
shooting out from somewhere
beneath this expanse,
yielding us to catalogues
of told and untold mishaps. (11)

One feels sympathy and pain as one reads these lines. One also feels terror at their manner of dying. At the same time, one also feels like appreciating these brave heroes who became martyrs of their dreams and desires. Their only mistake was that they dreamed of improving their lives. When these unsung heroes had started their journeys from the coast of Libya, including our speaker, they had high hopes from the ocean. They had thought they will be welcomed by the sea and will be able to go beyond with if not ease then at least with manageable difficulties. The speaker says that they were misinformed by the smugglers about the ways of the sea. The speaker informs this rather regretfully:

until the smugglers and the sea
spoke of its fidelity.
It was a soft, fluid tune:
the tender draw of water. (11)

Unfortunately, it was not the case. As the narrator remarks that they all had to unlearn everything on their way. As the boat, on which our speaker is travelling nears Lampedusa, the

situation becomes tense. The threat continues until they have not embarked upon land. There remains constant fear on board of being submerged into the sea the narrator becomes emotionally charged, as he concludes the poem:

What binds us,
in this boat, is a known fear,
a kinship of likely loss,
the understanding that we, too,
could become a band of unnamed
migrants found floating on the face of
the sea. (11)

Sea as Carrier:

Seventhly, in "Nightshift at a Coast Where a Coastguard finds a Body Washed Ashore," Adeoba presents the sea as a carrier of dead bodies to the shores. Here, the sea is shown as a messenger. It seems as if it is the duty of the sea to deliver the human cargo on to the Italian banks like a postman delivering letters. In the poem, as the speaker tells the reader that there is a coastguard on a nightshift on the other side of the Mediterranean and he notices something strange coming towards him. He is a seasoned professional as it is his fortieth year in service. He has been decoding the Sea's language since ages. He has seen countless bodies delivered like this on his side of the border. Today also, in his nightshift, he notices cowries floating towards him, sensing the worse, he stares carefully. He is not at all surprised when he notices:

When you check the stretch again,
you find him face-first in the shroud of
a wave.

The sea, shifting, heralds
its cargo in quick syllables of an onrush,
this body journeying. (14)

The body that is just delivered by the sea is that of a boy in his early youth. He is somewhere from Africa. After searching his clothes carefully, the coastguard finds a photograph of the boy of his younger days concealed carefully inside his caftan's pocket. In the photograph, the boy is barefoot and playing

football in an Italian jersey. It is quite evident that this boy had wanted to go to Italy to work and live a happy life. He is full of dreams and desires, but he lacked means in his mother country. While reading the poem, one feels sorry for the boy who died young and in this particular manner. His boat was drowned near, as the narrator reports, "coast of Sabratha, where the smugglers' dinghies mostly drown" (14). It seems that the sea has been doing this postal service ever since the new passage started in the second half of twentieth century. Thousands of migrants have crossed the ocean on unseaworthy dinghies into Europe and thousands of them have drowned since then in the process. This poem seems to be a tribute to those who have been drowned in the sea and whose bodies have been washed ashore by the waves.

Sea as Confidant:

Last, but not the least image of sea that one encounters in Adeoba's poems is that of the sea as confidant. In "Half Acre of Water," Adeoba presents this very situation. The poem is based on a real incident that took place on November 17th, 2017, when a mass funeral of 26 young women of Nigeria was organized in Salerno, Italy. These women were trying to cross the Mediterranean and their boat capsized during the transit. The speaker begins the narration on the note of gloom:

Gulls, too, are fleeing
that portion where their
bodies were drowned, those
Nigerian women, 26 of them. (16)

The speaker relates that these women were running away from their homes, as they were feeling oppressed by their circumstances. The narrator does not report the exact details, but one can presume that they were mostly oppressed by domestic violence and neglect. Maybe, they found their society to be less liberal and there were no opportunities for them as individuals to grow. It is also possible that perhaps, they were running away from penury

and inflation. Whatever their motivation of leaving their home was, it remains sure that they were heading towards Italy and were drowned in the process. It is also true, as the speaker in the poem puts it that they wanted to unburden their hearts of their tough situation and they found sea as perfect companion who would not only listen, but also embraced them in comparative warmth. This is how the speaker unfolds this process:

They had begun to drown
those many years ago—in homes
that were no longer homes—
long before they,
keen as early birds,
made for the waters
under the dark witness
of nights; when they said
only the sea could bear
the weight of their grief. (16)

When their bodies were found, as the narrator informs, they were all huddled together as if they clung to each other when the sea embraced them. Their huddle signifies that they were together not only in their struggle to live, but they were together when they were claimed by the sea, thereby ending their ordeal forever. They made half acre of water their new home and the sea became their protector and confidant during this process. The narrator relates this scene quite graphically:

They huddle even in death;
their mouths shaped as though
they wanted to say
what we do not know. (16)

Conclusion

Thus, it can safely be concluded that Adeoba handles both migration and history carefully and intricately. His treatment of history is not chronological in his poems rather for him, history is a larger unit which has no brakes or chapters. The poems that deal with the Old Passage and slavery are placed in between the collection *Exodus* whereas, the poems talking

about the New Passage are scattered throughout the entire book. Likewise, migration, in Adeoba's hands, is not just a category that has a pattern and procedure. He presents migration as both African and human phenomenon. Along with Africans, one also finds people from middle, central and south Asia and parts of Latin America and Caribbean Islands migrating to Europe, however Africans dominate in this regard, but one cannot dismiss other nationalities. Similarly, Adeoba treats sea in myriad ways. One finds the Sea as a biased historian and at other times as faithful record keeper. One also notices the sea as confidant and as a graveyard at the same time. One finds sea as carrier of bodies and memories and at other times as just a reference point. Sometimes, the sea provides the stage for the main action and at other times, is reduced to mere background. In short, *Exodus* by Adeoba is wonderful conglomeration of history and migration from African perspective that transpires on the sea.

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