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## IMMIGRATION AS A MIRAGE: DISILLUSIONMENT AND IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES IN SEFI ATTA'S 'TWILIGHT TREK'

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### ABSTRACT

The immigration of Africans to Europe to escape the hard economic realities in their countries has been a common trend over the years. The immigrants take risky undertakings across the Mediterranean Sea. This journey in quest for better life is full of ordeals as some immigrants lose their life and risk arrests for illegal treks. Many of the immigrants streak majorly from West and North Africa, with countries such as Nigeria, Libya, Senegal taking the lead: the major European immigrant recipient countries being among others Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. These immigrant experiences are the subject of Sefi Atta's short story, 'Twilight Trek' analyzed in this article. I explore the representation of these ordeals and paradoxes through the prism of Edward Said's Orientalism. More specifically, the concept of 'otherization' permeates my thoughts in the analysis of the short story. I posit that the short story represents immigration as a mirage and that through the treatment of the theme of disillusionment, the text negates the notion of immigration as a refuge.

**Key words:** Immigration, Mirage, Disillusionment, Otherization

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### INTRODUCTION

'Twilight Trek' explores one of the biggest challenges that affect people living in African countries. What comes out in the story is that the problem of human immigration is unique to entirely all African People and their countries. The mass exodus out of Africa into Europe is characterized by Africa's, political, social and economic problems. Politically for instance, Africa has largely been in turmoil with countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Ivory Coast to mention only a few having a long history of political intolerance. The political disorder in such countries has to a greater extent destabilized and fragmented peace and harmony. High level of poverty in Africa has also led

to massive walk-out. The perception is that the outside world is economically stable and thus can offer better life.

Through the process of "othering" Europe is compared with Canaan:

The Bible story of the Israelites' tumultuous exodus from Egypt to their Promised Land, Canaan that flows with honey and milk is akin to modern African exodus to the 'promised land' in Europe where they intend to find lands flowing with honey and milk from the face (Chotto, C 2013).

In this analogy we see the notion of 'othering', a concept further taken up by Slavenka Drakulic who observes:

I understand now that nothing but “otherness” killed Jews, and it began with naming them, by reducing them to the other. Then everything became possible. Even the worst atrocities like concentration camps or the slaughtering of civilians in Croatia or Bosnia (Drakulic, S: 1993:145)

Lajos Brons talks of ‘othering’ as:

The simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/ in-group has and the other out-group lacks and / or some undesirable characteristic that the other / out-group has and the self/ in-group lacks (Brons, L 2015)

‘Othering’ thus for Brons “sets up a superior self/ in-group in contract to an inferior other /out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit”.

The ‘othering’ process therefore results to binary opposition: Europe ‘the self’, Africa, ‘the other’. The resultant scenario is that Africans see themselves inferior together with the culture, political, economic and social outlook. Immigrating to Europe, to experience ‘civilization’ therefore becomes the ambition of African immigrants.

#### Literature Review

Extant related literature include Charl Chotto’s article on Sefi Atta’s ‘Twilight Trek’ titled, “Perception of Religion in the context of a people’s struggle for a way out of Hardship” in which he discusses the concept of ‘othering’ and compares the Biblical journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan with the contemporary allure of Africans to immigrate to the European metropolis. In his religious analysis of Sefi Atta’s ‘Twilight Trek’ Chotto contends that Christianity fails to offer solace to the immigrant characters. His ideas are germane to my discussion of the theme of disillusionment in the story. Ugwanyi Dele Maxwell paper, “Migration, Disillusionment and Diasperic Experiences in Segun Afolabi’s *Goodbye Lucille* and *A life elsewhere*” which examines the literary representation of the plight of Nigerians in Diaspora provides the basis of my analysis of ‘Twilight Trek’.

#### Discussion

The text sets in from the every onset with corruption scene (p.110) an agent hands the main character (Jean-Luc) a fake passport. The passport ignites the kick off of the trek even with its lack of authenticity. Jean-Luc is determined to move out of Nigeria by all means. Jean-Luc and the agent collude in forging travel document to enable him (Jean-Luc) get a chance to move out of Africa. That both the agent and Jean-Luc (not his real name) involve themselves in forgery of documents sets on the magnitude of suffering in Nigeria. That suffering is too much to wait for order and formalities (procedure of getting a genuine passport)

Jean- Luc says, “we will cross the Sahara to get to Morocco, and from there cross the Mediterranean to get into Spain” (p.110). The endurance that the characters have to have is long, tiresome and painful. Going to Spain is one thing, crossing the Sahara and the Mediterranean is another. In a binary opposition, Sahara is land and Mediterranean water. Sahara is characterized by harsh climatic conditions such as high temperatures. The Mediterranean on the other hand is a sea that divides two lands (Africa and Europe). Metaphorically, Mediterranean serves as a fragment of the earth that causes discontinuity of physical land that disrupts the immigrants trek. Similarly, the Mediterranean in its divisive nature separates Africa and Europe pitting Africa as the ‘other’ where immigrants are running away from and Europe as ‘the self’ where the emigrants want to seek solace. Jean-Luc continues to say, “we are illegal’s. It is not that we do not have enough money to fly overseas; it’s just that the foreign embassies do not grant Africans like us visas” (p110.) The African here is seen as ‘the other’. This concept of ‘the other’ is used by Western powers to construct and reduce people to be less than what they are.

Even in their privilege to afford flying to Europe, Africans are subjected to discrimination because of skin colour. Such otherization is given light by George W.F Hegel who in his book, *The Philosophy of History* argues for Europe’s demeaning of Africa; “Africa that is devoid of morals, religions and political order” In this ‘otherization’, Jean-Luc and other unnamed characters are treated by the

whites as lesser animals and thus subjected to psychological, physical torture. Psychological torture in the sense that Africans have to view themselves inferior to the whites. Physical torture in that they have to use the long tedious way through the desert and the sea. Flights are a preservation of the white race while Africans have to contend with land mode of transportation.

In a dream, Jean-Luc hears her mother tell him, "A man she knew hid himself in the wheel well of an aeroplane that flew overnight to London" (p.110) This highlights how Africans experience torture at first hand in their zeal to fly overseas. By not 'properly' boarding a plane the unnamed man flies with little decorum. He literary flies on the outside of the aeroplane just like a bird would do if it patched on the plane. The image of the African man on an aeroplane and at night for that matter is disturbing. The risk he has taken to fly abroad brings out existential tendencies of a means to an end. That an African has to fly 'outside' a plane to Europe is rather absurd and risky affair.

The journey through Sahara desert is hard and hectic. As Jean-Luc and Patience progress with their journey through the Sahara, Jean-Luc philosophizes the journey's complications and sums up that, "only camels are meant to survive in the Sahara" (p.112)

On a stop-over, at the foot of a mountain, Jean-Luc, Patience and other unnamed characters have to camp in a forest on the mountain where travelers stop. Jean-Luc says, "The people here are not like any villagers; they are like refugees on television, squatting under plastic sheets: men, women and children, mothers nursing slapping their arms and legs". (p. 116)

Sleeping on a plastic sheet on a tree is inhuman. There is absence of descent shelter for the emigrants. The immigrants should also be prepared for thieves. In this way the thieves symbolize ruthlessness of life; that there is no one to pity the immigrants even in their desperate situation. Similarly, the possibility of conmen as indicated in the text implies that everybody is using crooked means to survive.

While in the forest on top of a mountain, Jean-Luc meets Obazee, Nigeria immigrant. Obazee

tells him (Jean-Luc) of the Tangier security forces who are described as ruthless. Obazee says, "They keep catching me. The last time they beat me up well, well." (p. 119) The barbed wire again exposes 'otherization'; that a demarcation so rigorous as has to be erected to serve as a barrier to African immigrants entrance into the civilized world. For Tangier security forces, the barbed wire is of special use; to tame African inflow into Europe. The barbed wire therefore serves to cage Africans like lesser animals out of Europe.

Between the forest on the top of the mountain that is accommodating Jean-Luc, Obazee, Patience and other unnamed immigrants, Spain is only twenty miles away. But then, the in-between the mountain and Spain is a water body; the Mediterranean Sea. Obazee tells Jean-Luc, "You can cross anytime if you have enough to pay samsara to take you. The pateras carry more passengers. The dinghies are cheaper, but they capsize. People have drowned". (p.119) Mediterranean Sea draws a thin line between life and death. Two options for the immigrants: cheating death narrowly in the dangerous waters and that of miserably and painfully dying in the mucky waters. In a dream, Jean-Luc is told by her mother about a Malian man "... he could not afford his fare. He crossed the Sahara on foot. It took him several years. The Moroccan security forces got hold of him when he reached Tangier. They repatriated him straight back to the border of Algeria and told him to find his way to Gao. Yes, with the same two legs that brought him to their country" (p.120) Such a risky immigration trek which often results in death in the sea and in Europe illuminates to the much suffering that the African immigrants have to put up with.

In Ceuta, Jean-Luc's mother (in a dream) also tells him of detention for months of a Rwandese man. The Sierra Leonean who tried to scale the barbed wire severally, until his skin was practically shredded. The Nigerian who "hoped that the baby in her belly would be considered worth of asylum. The baby came out two months too early, right here in the forest. Mother and child never made it to the next day" (p.120) The African woman here passes through both the difficulties of pregnancy and the journey. In seeking to give birth

in the European metropolis, the woman wants to beat 'otherization'; so that the child is treated not as an ordinary African. "Then there was the Senegalese. She could not swim. She found a samsara to carry her by dinghy, and it was not that the dinghy leaked or capsized. It was the samsara he said he could not get too close to the shore; the guardian civil might catch him, so he ordered her to jump out of his dinghy into the sea and find her way somehow". (p.121)The samsara engages in a business characterized by fear; the samsara is therefore 'the other' and the guardian civil 'the self'. His (the samsara) is a difficult business of hide and seek and largely lacks freedom of operation

#### Conclusion

Sefi Atta's 'Twilight Trek', portrays various characters such as Jean-Luc, Patience, Obazee as facing torture in their quest for better life outside Africa. Their journey is long, tedious, and torturous and death is as real as life. And even in their European trek, 'Twilight Trek' shows a journey of vanity even after all suffering endured by the characters. The characters do not advance fully into European world in this story. Their dreams only remain as a mirage to the end.

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