

Uprooted Migrant Experiences in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*

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Abstract:

The paper examines the uprooted experiences and the struggle for survival of the migrants with particular reference to Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*. Filled with hope for a better life people migrate from their native country to another. While doing so problems await the migrants in their migrated land where they become victims of identity crisis, racial discrimination, alienation, nostalgia and other cultural disorientation. *Behold the Dreamers* deals with the brutality of immigration system that prevails in America, and hence the paper attempts to bring out the toils and pains experienced by the diasporic communities in America, by the way of denying their opportunities, discrimination and alienation. It also throws light on the sufferings encountered by the immigrants, and the dysfunctional immigration system by which the immigrants find it difficult to survive in their migrated land. Independence is not at all possible in America for the immigrants, and this is being expressed through the life of Jende, the protagonist and Neni, his wife. The alienated feeling of the migrants and the struggle for existence of the immigrants are discussed in Diasporic perspective.

Keywords: Alienation, Dependence, Migration, Race, Survival

Imbolo Mbue a native of Limbe, Cameroon, a novelist and a short story writer, had migrated to New York and is now a resident of the United States. Her critically acclaimed debut novel *Behold the Dreamers* published in 2016 follows the path of a Cameroonian family whose members like many newcomers to America, harbour dreams of success

unavailable to them. The painful encounter between the Immigrants and the Americans, the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the sufferings of the migrants due to racial discrimination have also been enfolded in this paper.

Immigration is a term normally used to describe the movement of people from their native country to another. People migrate with a hope of getting better opportunities. Sometimes they succeed in their process and sometimes they fail in achieving their goals resulting to a feeling of uproot which is genuine and intense. Only a few show a greater sense of adjustment, adaptability, mobility and accessibility. Based on the conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land, the migrants share similarities and contrasts. Various other immigrant problem such as dependence, alienation and racial discrimination faced by the Diaspora communities in their dreamland are discussed herewith, which is a place of hope and promise for the immigrants.

First, the paper deals with the plight of an immigrant due to migration. Migration takes place due to various reasons governed by historical, political, economy including higher education, better prospects and good job. Hoping for better prospects people move towards America. But here they face many problems as the very immigration system of America is very poor and dysfunctional which is made evident when they try to get citizenship or Green Card for their survival. During the interview with Mr. Edwards, regarding Green Card Jende, the protagonist says, "Immigration is slow sir; very funny how they work" (7). Jende takes much effort to get the immigration papers which he had been trying for three years with the help of Winston, his cousin. He laments, ". . . he'd been fighting for papers in America. He'd been in the country for only four weeks when Winston took him to meet with an immigration lawyer- they needed to find a way for him to stay in the country permanently after his visitor's visa expired" (18).

Through the above said words it is found out that the very first step of getting legal papers is not at all an easy affair in a country like America where people will never be allowed to reside without proper papers. As an immigrant, this marks the beginning of suffering in Jende's family. It seems as if "The car seat had turned into a bed of needles" (58). Also, the immigrants find no solution to solve their problems without another person's help which is also very difficult, and hence they feel a kind of left out from the society. The hypocritical system is humorously pointed out as, "The whole system is a joke! Walking around completely mindless of the fact that they're living in a society ruled by a cold-blooded cabal. How long are we going to remain in this bondage? I mean, really, how long?" (105).

Dependence is another factor which is dealt in the paper. This paves way for the survival of the immigrants as they are pushed to the core. Though the nation is new for the immigrants, and in spite of its varied customs and culture, the immigrants scope for an uplift. It is natural that a new entrant would depend on his employer to fulfill his wishes in order to reside in the new land. He would also seek a few other residents of the land, for guidance. Again in New York Jende is able to get a job as a chauffeur with Mr. Edwards by depending on Winston. He accepts the fact, "I got the job only because of Winston, not because of myself" (308).

Also, the immigrants have to depend on officials such as judges and lawyers to get settled in their dreamland. Jende has to depend on Bubakar, the lawyer, to apply for a student visa for his wife Neni, so that this would enable him to bring his family to America. Thus, it is evident that the immigrant population is completely dependents in America. Though Jende's family strives hard to get the legal papers, many a time, their attempts ended up in failure. So Neni has started depending on the American Church, where she attends the services regularly with a hope that the congregation would rescue herself and her family from

being deported from America: “I think it’s good for us to start going to church at a time like this. I was watching on news the other day about this family that was supposed to be deported and they ran to a church. The church people let them stay in the church-the government could not touch them there” (229).

Apart from this, the immigrants are dependent on the migrated land to fulfill their financial dreams also. Once while driving with Cindy, Jende’s employer’s wife in New Town, he gets a phone call from his native town asking money for paying school fees for his brother’s children. With the help of Cindy, Jende helps his brother with the money he needed. Also, when his father was hospitalized his brother said: “You get for promise for send the money now- now-so, or Papa go die by daybreak” (55). Even at the time of his father’s death, he sends money which the family had required for his funeral. Thus, it is clear that many a time the immigrants are forced to depend on the Natives to survive in their migrated land.

Yet another issue dealt in the paper is alienation. The uprooted experience faced by the immigrants have a strong sense of separation, and hence they feel a sense of emptiness and loneliness. It is a feeling of being detached, bring disconnected and being cut off from other people. Jende feels very happy on being appointed as the chauffeur for Mr. Clark, and is further excited that he would no longer have to search for jobs and hence he could ride all day in New York. His heart is filled with joy and is desired to express this news to the people whom he meets on the pathway. Unfortunately, in a city like New York, he is unable to express his emotion as he knows no one. Feeling isolated, he dreams that if he were in Limbe he would have got out of the car to deliver the good news: “But here, on these streets of old brick houses and faded lawns in the Bronx, he knew no one he could run to and repeat what Clark’s secretary had just told him” (15).

Staying in a host country and working for the welfare of their family seem to be rough and tough for the immigrants. Being away from their homeland, the sense of alienation draws

towards their native land through nostalgia. Jende is satisfied with his work, but is often drawn with memories of his homeland. He expresses his views towards his homeland to Edward saying, "Limbe is very special, Mr. Edwards. In Limbe we live simple lives, but we enjoy our lives well" (385). He also says that Limbe is the "Town of Friendship" (37), which welcomes everyone. By saying these, Jende compares Cameroon and America and states that America do not have the best of everything, and finally asserts that America could never compete his homeland. The wrong perception people have towards home is put across by Neni as, "people act as if things in America have to be better than things everywhere else" (89).

Jende's family feels the sense of isolation and uproot during Christmas in America where they mostly prepare and have their food alone without any guests. But in Limbe, people go from house to house wishing Happy Christmas, and this would be the happiest celebration for the people. Salman Rushdie observes: "One physical alienation from India at almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind" (10).

Once Winston invites Neni to his birthday celebration at Hudson Hotel where she feels alienated among the Whites. Neni fears to interact with the Whites who pretend to understand what she speaks. At the same time, she is upset by the way she has been treated by them. Even Jenny who is closer to Neni, introduces her as: "She has just come from Africa" (93).

The other migrant experience dealt in the paper is Racial prejudice in the work place, the study area, on the streets, hotels and hospitals. Roediger points out the situation as, "Race has often been used in American industry to divide and conquer labour. In the US South, textile mill owners and operators used racial fears to keep unions out of the work place. In the

Midwest and North, factory owners used nativist versus immigrant status, as well as race, to create discord among those factions in the labour force” (18).

Even the police, who ought to safeguard people without discrimination, do not care about the safety of the blacks. In turn, they give protection to the Whites and in such a context, the immigrants are highly affected. The author clearly delineates the condition as: “The police is for the protection of white people, my brother. Maybe black woman and black children sometimes, but not black men. Never black men. Black men and police are palm oil and water” (BD 74). Also, often the blacks as well as the whites seem afraid of being together. Jendesets forth his fear of the police, when he is with Mighty, a white boy by thinking that if someone sees them, he would call the police notifying that a black man is with a white boy in a luxury car. This characterizes racial conflicts encountered by the migrants in an alienated land. The situation is made clear in *The Grass is Singing*, which describes the house boy Moses who cannot ride in the same car with the corpse of Mary Turner: “Native policeman lift the body of Mary Turner which was wrapped in a blanket into the back seat . . . they could not put Moses the murderer into the same car with her; one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead, and murdered by him” (Lessing 24).

The Africans are pointed as blacks by the Americans who consider them as subordinates. On the other hand, the Black people are unable to protest against the Native Americans, as they are superior. When Jende wants to raise his voice against Mrs. Edwards, Winston warns him that he could do nothing since he is a black man, “You’re just a black man who drives around” (200). Neni, Jende’s wife too had witnessed the pain of being considered as a black woman in the immigrant nation. When she carelessly hits a young white man in a party, she is astounded by the way he looked at her: “The drink did not spill, but the young man gave her a look and she was certain meant: What the hell are u doing

here? You stupid African woman” (94). Also, when Jende is fired out of the job by Clark, Neni develops a rage against Clark’s wife. This spirit of enrage in Neni is because of the cruelty she had experienced in her family and herself in the migrated land. Hence, she transforms herself to protest her individuality. She raises her voice against Mrs. Clark, with an intention to show who the Africans are. Neni says: “She thought she could use us, stupid African people who don’t know how to stand up for themselves” (272).

Racial discrimination in America is prevalent in education too. Scholarships to pursue higher education is denied for the immigrant citizens. Contribution towards college and community are given only to qualify a person, but here they insist that the beneficiary should be the citizen of the nation. Neni, though she had secured good marks in her examination, is not qualified for getting the scholarship. She pleads the Dean to accept her application, but the Dean who is a Green Card holder has blindly refused Neni’s request due to the fact that she is black.

It is made clear that the diasporians’ hopes and dreams get vanished, and hence they undergo some change in their character unintentionally. Neni witnesses a great change in her husband Jende, who had so far been pouring showers of love on her, had now replaced it with showers of floggings. She reveals his changed attitude as, “He hadn’t been the same man, since the day the letter for deportation hearing arrived” (235). Verbal lashings and floggings become prominent in the relationship between Jende and his wife. Jende who had given promises to take care of his wife till his end, is now spilling insults which she had never expected from her husband. Still, as an immigrant, Neni finds no one to express her pains and sorrows. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie exposes the plight of the immigrants as, “He loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even very offensive to his own” (278).

The journey for an immigrant, to survive in a foreign land and to succeed in life, is very hard. Historical, political and economic systems in America make the livelihood of a migrant miserable. The migrants' search for identity, displaced sense of feeling, alienation, uproot and isolation make their life uncomfortable. Survival is not just to be alive but it is something through which the immigrants are supposed to overcome all the hurdles they face in their immigrant nation to get settled and achieve their goals. Both Jende and his family become unsuccessful in all their attempts to survive in America. They return to their homeland after many years of disappointment in America, particularly in their dreams and hopes which turn into deception. Hence they walk towards a new front: "New York City was passing her by. Bridges and Billboards bearing smiling people were passing her by. Skyscrapers and brown stones were rushing by. Fast Too Fast. Forever" (379).

The author also wishes to codify some immigrants, out of hard work and pain, get enlightened. For instance, Jende's immigration lawyer Bubukar, a Nigerian, has settled in America for about twenty-nine years. Jende's cousin Winston and Neni's friend Fatou too have turned out to be successful in their migrated land out of their hard work and adjustment. In *Life of Pi*, the hope for survival is portrayed by Martel as, "I should not count on outside help. Survival had to start with me. In my experience, a castaway's worst mistake is to hope too much and to do too little. Survival starts by paying attention to what is close at hand and immediate. To look out with idle hope is tantamount to dreaming one's life away" (52).

In the paper the author identifies the fact the migrants migrate with a hope of wellbeing and well settlement. They strive hard to achieve their goal, but when they are not rewarded in the process, they feel disappointed and are filled with grief. The author stresses upon the fact that in the midst of struggles and disappointment they are asked to overcome all their suffering by being dependent, adjustment for their peaceful survival and successful life. If they fail in doing so, they will be left astray without job and money in their alienated land.

It is good to overcome the uprooted experiences by accommodating and adjusting in the migrated land and thereby striving towards the goal to taste the fruit of success with satisfaction and happiness.

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