



Migration and Transformation of the Individual in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

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Abstract

This work examines the trajectories of some key characters, whose migrant status exposes them to precarity across the narrative of Helon Habila's *Travellers*. The narrative reflects several epistemic paradigms related to the prefixal morpheme *Trans-*; particularly as it relates to *transformation* in the context of *cross-border* mobility. Such journeys entail a process of change that might unfold through experiences of rupture or *transcendence* and *transgression*. Drawing on this perspective, the article seeks to conceptualize the migrant's transformation as a form of deconstruction that operates both on the psychological and identity levels. This dynamic involves a sequence of "alteration and reconstruction" or "deformation and reformation," which reshapes the modes of self-perception and self-representation. The analysis operates within the theoretical framework of transculturality first developed by Fernando Ortiz (1940) and subsequently articulated by Jean Lamore (1992). It conceptualizes the mutual shaping of human groups through their intercultural contacts and interactions. Thus, this article investigates how migration, in Habila's novel, generates transcultural spaces that drive diverse forms of identity transformation.

Résumé :

Ce travail examine les trajectoires de personnages majeurs exposés à la précarité due à leur statut de migrants dans *Travellers* de Helon Habila. Le récit se fait l'écho d'un ensemble de paradigmes épistémiques convoqués par le morphème préfixal *trans-*, révélant les multiples métamorphoses qui accompagnent la mobilité transfrontalière. Franchir une frontière, dans l'univers du roman, c'est entrer dans un territoire d'incertitude où la rupture, la transcendance ou la transgression deviennent les matériaux d'une transformation intérieure. Dans cette perspective, l'article appréhende la mutation du sujet migrant comme un processus de déconstruction qui affecte aussi bien la psyché que les formes de l'identité. Cette dynamique, faite de « déformation et de reformation », d'« altération et de renaissance », remodèle les façons dont l'individu se perçoit et s'offre au regard d'autrui. L'analyse s'inscrit dans le cadre théorique de la transculturalité, tel que formulé par Fernando Ortiz (1940) puis approfondi par Jean Lamore (1992), qui conçoit les groupes humains comme des entités façonnées réciproquement par le jeu continu des contacts et des échanges interculturels. C'est ainsi que le roman de Habila donne à voir des espaces transculturels mouvants, matrices de recompositions identitaires, où au-delà de la traversée géographique, la migration apparaît surtout comme un passage initiatique capable de reconfigurer l'être.

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Introduction

Migration narratives have become central to contemporary African fiction, offering imaginative and critical engagements with displacement, precarity, and the reconfiguration of identity in multicultural or transcultural spaces. In this trend, one can note some reliable literary production such as Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe* (2000) and Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019), which address the sociocultural and identity challenges faced by African migrants in Europe. Among these works, Habila's novel is noticeable for its polyphonic structure and its nuanced portrayal of migrants from diverse cultural origins crossing border to and within Europe. The characters in *Travellers* traverse national, cultural but also psychological borders, which expose them to instability and compel them toward new forms of being and becoming. What this study seeks to conceptualize is that the notion that border-crossing in *Travellers* does not merely imply geographic displacement but constitutes a transformative process. This perspective leads to the guiding question of this article: How does *Travellers* represent the migrant's passage across borders as a transcultural process that simultaneously deconstructs and reconstructs identity? Or how does the "Trans-" semantics shape the narrative logic to convey the complexities of migrant precarity and self-transformation?

The migrant figures portrayed by Habila appear suspended in what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms an "in-between" space. He describes it an ambivalent zone in which identity is neither preserved nor simply replaced, but reconfigured through tension, loss, and encounter (Bhabha). This complex dynamic invites a theoretical approach attentive to cultural crossings and hybrid formations. To account for these processes, this article draws on the theoretical framework of transculturality developed by Fernando Ortiz (1940) and adapted by Jean Lamore (1992). Ortiz's concept moves beyond earlier models of acculturation by emphasizing the bidirectional, mutually transformative nature of cultural encounters. Lamore further refines this conception by demonstrating how transcultural interactions generate new identity formations rather than mere assimilations or juxtapositions of cultures. Applying this framework to *Travellers* allows us to interpret the migrant experience, not simply as a passage through foreign spaces but as a complex interplay of deconstruction and reconstruction at the psychological, identity levels. Thus, the work first outlines how *Travellers* fits within African

migration fiction before analysing its depiction of transcultural border-crossing. It then applies Ortiz and Lamore's framework to show how the novel dramatizes identity as a process of continual unmaking and remaking.

1. Migration and Sociocultural Changes: Disruption and Connection

In Helon Habila's *Travellers* the narrative does not present migration as a linear passage from one stable location to another. Border-crossing is thus more than a geographic transition; it marks entry into new regimes of sociocultural norms and reconfigures how migrants perceive and reconstruct the self-redefinition as the lot of the migrant condition. In recent decades, the intra-continental and the intercontinental migrations have become a significant transformative sociocultural process. Within this fictional universe, the new space is generally a major African or Western cities that constitute different experiences. In most cases, there is an encounter with some spaces that are regulated socially and culturally differently from those of their starting points.

The narrative, for example, stages a long transit as constitutive of the experience of the protagonist named Karim Al-Bachir. This migrant's route from Somalia through Yemen, Syria, Turkey, and Bulgaria, before reaching Germany (Habila 163-195), exemplifies how various border crossings might induce disruptions due to exhaustion, precarity and epistemic uncertainty on the one hand. On the other hand, there are connections with different spaces and sociocultural realities. The cumulative effects of disruptions and connections can lead to transcultural transformations, since the migrant experiences unusual social and cultural norms, tries to adapt to them or reshape them. These culture-bond transformations can be apprehended through the concept of transculturality. Considering Jean Lamore's formulation, which is rooted in Fernando Ortiz's work (1940), transculturation underlines the reciprocal influences between migrants and their host communities (Lamore). This shows how migrants often adapt to the host dominant social cultural frameworks while reinventing their own or self-identity. The narrative of Helon Habila's novel provides illustrations of this through the journeys of the protagonists in situations of migration. Karim Al-Bachir and some other migrants are depicted as some subjects that are stripped of their initial social and professional statuses. This happens to them

for having crossed cultural zones of their continent and landed into some spaces with entirely different cultural norms, specifically Western culture.

This condition aligns with the description of the concept of transculturality as proposed by Chantal Forestal (2007). According to her, transculturality aims to transform representations and models of thinking about relationships by relying on human and cultural values, which she puts: “la transculturalité a pour objectif de transformer les représentations et les modèles de penser les relations en s’appuyant sur des valeurs humaines et culturelles” (Forestal 395). From this assertion, one can infer that the transcultural situation of the migrant fosters a significant change. This change can take various directions, which can be understood through the term of deconstruction of the migrant’s identity. In the current work, deconstruction of identity refers to the process of dismantling the initial identity to form a new one. This involves a form of conversion through alteration or renovation of the existing identity. The objective is to adapt the self-identity or personality to a new social reality or another cultural environment. However, representing this anthropological issue in fiction allows us to move beyond the empirical framework and analyze the concept of transculturality from a literary perspective. This brings us back to the notion of transculturalism, which, according to Angela Buono (2011), is a potential interpretative method of any reality related to the passage from one culture to another.

To labour further on the literary aspect of transculturality, one may consider the fact that it also refers to a social phenomenon that concerns two or more different cultures. This perspective aligns with the social situation of migrants during their border crossings to European cities, as plotted in Habila’s fictional universe. From this angle, the social phenomenon appears through the range of identity shifts induced by the social experiences of migrants within different cultural matrices and social practices. This literary perspective is at work in *Travellers* through a narrative technique made of imagery that allows for a deeper exploration of the migrant experience. On this, the autodiegetic narrator accounts: “his face was lined, prematurely old, [...] each of them an eloquent testimony to what he had left behind, to the borders and rivers and deserts he had crossed to get to Berlin” (Habila 5). This reinforces the irregularity of the route of migration and symbolizes the weight of the physical challenges faced along the journey. Indeed, the description mentions that the migrant’s face could measure what he has lost or abandoned

through the process of migration. This an aspect of the “Trans” semantics that is developed in our analysis through the notion of transition and transformation. Arguably, the prematurely old face can be read as a palimpsest since it connects to the natural elements crossed by the migrant; which may also constitute a set of metonyms for hardship, clandestinity and fear. In fact, this passage symbolically associates the migration route to risks of violence, vulnerability and instability.

Thus, beyond the physical traits, there is the emotional and psychological aspect. The experiences of traversing geographical areas and strange sociocultural influences are some psychological mayhems that could disorient the migrants. One of the protagonists that particularly symbolises the disorienting effects of migration is Lambo. This character, from Nigeria has been living in Europe for so many years that he no longer feels like being a Nigerian folk. Yet he neither considers himself as a European. The autodiegetic narrator ironically describes this migrant as a man who exists somewhere in the middle, in the limbo. This exemplifies what R. Ufuoma states as “the emotional costs associated with uprooting oneself and the challenges of beginning anew in a different location” (Ufuoma 215). The migrant is off the cultural landmark that used to guide and orient his social interactions. Regarding this, is it possible for the migrant subject to remain the same sociocultural entity? Can the initial identity or personality remain unchanged in such a condition of survival?

Considering the argument above, we can assume that such a condition might induce change of the migrant’s personality. Then, going to Europe is not only transcending some geographical barriers, but also going through a symbolic reclassification of the self. Accordingly, the symbolic associated to depiction of the migrants unveils how the conditions of people facing various cultural settings can shape their identity and sense of resilience. This indicates that, it is possible to introduce the idea of deconstruction of identity, where migrants dismantle their initial identities to form new ones in response to new cultural environments. This process involves alterations that help individuals adapt to their new social realities. The initial personality loses some traits and acquires new ones during the journey from the African continent to the European continent; this corresponds to transculturality. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the process of identity shift does not change entirely the migrants to the point where they lose all their sociocultural identities.

Rather, as evidenced by the experiences of the selected protagonists in *Travellers*, this process is nuanced and varies among individuals. Each migrant's experience is unique, suggesting that while collective identity changes may occur, personal adaptations do not erase one's sociocultural background. The transformations experienced by those characters reflect the complexities of transcultural encounters: some may correspond to transcendence, while others might signify transgression.

2. Transcendence or Adaptation of Identity

Various reasons may account for the necessity of adaptation or transcendence on the part of the African migrants who have reached European cities. First, they are often confined in refugee shelters in some conditions that evocatively recall the slave trade, that historical experience of dehumanisation. It is difficult to conceive that refugees could live in the places described by the protagonists in Habila's *Travellers*. The novel reveals that, in Berlin, migrants are accommodated in a type of site called *Heim*. Describing this place the main narrator reports,

The Heim was an abandoned school building, most of its windows had no panes, and its yard was overgrown with grass and trash. [...] The smell hits us even before we entered the building: fetid and moist and revolting. Heim. Home. This was the most un-homely place I had ever seen. (Habila 57)

This passage paints a worrying picture of the 'Heim.' The broken windows and the overgrown yard denote an unsettling and neglected place. Along with that, the sensory detail of the smell suggests an atmosphere of discomfort and repulsion. Then, the use of the word "Heim," which means, "home" in German, becomes ironic. There is a contrast between the idea of home and the actual state of the building. This irony emphasizes a lack of the warmth and safety associated with a home in the homeland of the migrants. The phrase "the most un-homely place I had ever seen" powerfully underscores this dissonance.

Another protagonist explains that in Bulgaria, migrants live in an inhospitable camp. This harsh environment contrasts with the better living conditions they hoped to find in Europe. He accounts, "this place used to be an actual prison, but now is empty so they use it for refugees, but it is really a prison" (Habila 181). The descriptions of the living environment of the

African refugees show that they are in a filthy and degrading condition. That could mean that they are identified as some people who do not deserve due hospitality in the European setting, because they are different. This spatial segregation imposed on the migrant echoes, what Frantz Fanon identifies as the structural mechanisms of domination. For him, the colonized are reduced to constrained and objectified existences to remind them of their subjugated status. Articulating this idea, Mustapha Haddab argues that, colonial systems operate through a dialectic of violence and counter-violence that shapes the subjectivity of the oppressed by depriving them of action and spatial autonomy (Haddab 82). Thus, by foregrounding the brutal reality of the shelter systems for migrants, Habila's narrative provides an example of colonial-like subjugation of migrants.

African migrants in Europe are challenged in various aspects, just to have them psychologically subjugated. In addition to the shelter system, there is the issue of migrants' job in most European countries. It is predominant to see the contradiction between the initial professional status of migrants and the jobs they do to survive in Europe. Abigail O. Oaikhena highlights this contrast as; talking about the migrants, she puts that, "despite their qualification(s) and exposure they are constantly experiencing issues of borderline and subjugation for being black in Europe, as they are subjected to jobs that contradict their status" (Oaikhena 196). What we notice is the racial discrimination and inequality faced by African migrants. Despite the qualifications and experiences that individuals may possess, their racial identity may constitute a systematic barrier. This suggests that the professional relegation aligns with the social downsizing and marginalization of the migrants, what could bring about some psychological issues.

The main aspect about these psychological issues is that, the self-perception of the migrant gets affected. Indeed, perceiving that they are not important, because of their identity, could foreshadow a process of transformation of the migrant subjects. That can but trigger adaptation where possible or transcendence when adaptation becomes untenable. Indeed, we refer to adaptation as a pragmatic recalibration under constraint while transcendence is a form of reconstitution of the self beyond prior limits. These transformation processes emerge as the crucial survival strategies of the migrants within the European urban setting. In fact, those travellers from Africa are used to the culture of hospitality and respect of strangers. This is

observable through the living conditions of western people in African cities. The inhospitable conditions of the fictional universe depicted in *Travellers* do not align with the sociocultural norms to which migrants are accustomed in Africa. Thus, the migrants, confronted with different sociocultural realities, initiate a process of reviewing their own identities in order to adapt.

The extradiegetic narrator of the novel reveals this aspect when concluding about the potential fate of some protagonists as follows, “they were two strangers in a strange city” (Habila 123). The relevant aspect here is about the indication ‘strange city’. This indication could denote that the sociocultural realities they face in this city are different from what they know. Thus, they have to survive in an environment where they are the odd ones because of their status of migrants. This condition of survival can be extended to many other African immigrants in various European cities, since “white people always assume every black person travelling is a refugee” (42). That means that all the African travelling to western countries are some poor and desperate people in quest for asylum. Putting this assertion on behalf of an African protagonist unveils the stigmatisation and categorization of the African migrants in the western discourse. The identity of African migrants is associated to that of some parasites, which makes them feel disregarded and rejected. This experience reverberates the reflection of Franz Fanon on the formation of selfhood under oppressive conditions. On that, he puts, “In the World through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself” (Fanon 229). This insight traduces how the migrant’s subjectivity is shaped through a continual negotiation with imposed external images, forcing them to alter their idiosyncrasies or reinvent themselves in order to survive.

This change conveys a form of transcendence that entails the process of moving beyond the cultural and social norms that define their initial status. In Habila’s fictional universe, Manu from Libya and Karim Al-Bashir from Somalia are some migrants whose trajectories embody this notion of personal identity adaptation. In their respective home countries, with patriarchal sociocultural norms, these two characters held the status of respectable citizens. They lived in a sociocultural environment that is different from those they encounter during their journey and upon arrival. Their native cultural norms collide with the contrasting cultural norms of the fictional Western setting where they reside. Indeed, on behalf of the aforementioned protagonists, the novel highlights the clash between the migrants’ original

cultural norms and those of the new environment. This dissonance can create a sense of alienation and confusion as migrants try to navigate and adapt to unfamiliar customs and expectations. It underscores the idea that migration is not just a physical journey but also a cultural transition, requiring individuals to reconcile their previous experiences with their present realities.

When exposed to such sociocultural variations and hostilities, individuals are likely to reform or construct another identity. Homi K. Bhabha provides a theoretical frame for understanding this reinvention. As he asserts that, “there is a space ‘in-between the designations of identity’ and this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity” (Bhabha 4). This third zone gives migrants the capacity to transcend the cultural and social norms that once defined their initial status and to construct transformative new identities within the space of intercultural encounter. That is what we notice through the trajectories of the aforementioned migrants, in *Travellers*, as they adapt to their new environment. Notably, the character named Manu is made to abandon to his original professional identity and reform himself in menial jobs. Indeed, this respected doctor in his home country finds himself working as a nightclub bouncer, a less prestigious job. This occupation contradicts his social status, as revealed by the narrator: “He wonders what his wife would think if she saw him now, a bouncer at the Sahara. [...] he’ll find something somewhere, cleaning, construction, dishwashing” (Habiba 75). This reflection means that there is a shift from a stable self-image to that of a dislocated identity. Thus, this passage of the novel shows how transcultural environment can *transform* the self.

The protagonist’s acceptance of menial and culturally inappropriate jobs does not merely signal socioeconomic degradation; it reflects the broader psychological violence inherent in the migrant condition. This identity conflict is symptomatic of what recent migration studies by J. Lee et al. describe as *status inconsistency*, the drastic mismatch between one’s pre-migration social standing and the low-status roles available in the host country. In this context, the protagonist’s transition from respected Libyan doctor to nightclub bouncer and quasi-escort becomes a rupture whereby the migrant loses the social markers that once legitimized his professional identity, family role, or community prestige. Moreover, performing tasks culturally coded as feminine or offering companionship to women challenges the patriarchal gender

expectations that structured his sense of masculinity in Libya. This dynamic is particularly evident in *Travellers* on behalf of the trajectory of Karim Al-Bashir. This Somalian migrant is emotionally disoriented to the point that he can no longer reconcile his self-perception with the external perceptions imposed by the new sociocultural settings. Consequently, he begins to disenfranchise from the sociocultural norms of his motherland and adopt some alternative standards that could distort his initial social identity. On this, he admits that “he did join in [illegal business] for a time, and the money was good” (Habila 175).

For a man depicted as a respectable member of his community in the home country, such involvement in trafficking corresponds to an unusual habit. It can be interpreted as a departure from his former moral and sociocultural framework. Regarding the necessity to survive in the host country, this could also be the construction, an identity of adaptation. So, the migrant subject will distort or break some sociocultural laws but not to the extent of the total loss of one’s true nature. We note that the changes operated in the life of the two aforementioned protagonists are meant to adapt their identity to the new context created by the exile in some different sociocultural environments. However, the transformation may concern only cultural perceptions, but not to extend that the migrant loses moral values and ethic. The tension around identity becomes even more palpable in the reaction of Karim Al-Bashir’s wife, who admonishes him: “Now we are in this strange land, you can’t break any law” (Habila 175). Her injunction functions as far more than a pragmatic warning about legal conduct; it is a subtle appeal to preserve a coherent sense of self amid the disorienting pressures of displacement. In her view, the identity he must safeguard is not bound to cultural markers or inherited traditions, but rather to the ethical core that guarantees his dignity. In this foreign landscape, where the migrant is reduced to stereotype, she insists on an interior continuity, a moral self-possession that resists dissolution. This aligns with Angela Buono’s idea that, identity is continuously shaped by crossing cultural boundaries. Thus, in such a condition of active reconfiguration of the self within a context of displacement, the words of Karim’s wife reveal a mode of self-preservation. Her message is that, even when uprooted, one must remain rooted in an integrity the host society cannot confiscate.

There is another form of transformation, moving beyond

circumstantial or adaptive changes to reveal a profound rupture with established sociocultural norms in both the home country and the host society. This transformation is not simply a response to environmental pressures; rather, it evolves into a deliberate process of crossing boundaries and defying the cultural normative conventions that once governed the initial identity. What emerges is a deeper phase of personality reformation shaped by some acts of transgression that dismantle earlier frameworks of belonging and make way for a radically reconstructed self.

3. Transgression or Distortion of Identity

This pattern of radical transformation reaches its most striking expression in the experience of some of the migrants depicted in Habila's novel. Mark Chinomba is one of them, as the trajectory of this character extends beyond adaptation to embody a form of transgression of sociocultural codes. Unlike the previous protagonists, whose identity shifts emerge from the pressures of survival, Mark's evolution signals a deliberate rupture from both the values of his Malawian upbringing and the normative expectations of the European context he inhabits. Through the characterization of this migrant, Habila's novel presents a form of identity reformation that does not merely adapt to new norms but rather destabilizes them. The transformation of the migrant is pushed into a controversial reinvention. As the story unrolls in *Travellers*, the interactions between the autodiegetic protagonist and Mark allow the narrative to reveal that this migrant has a peculiar personality. Indeed, this character exemplifies the deformation of the initial identity at two levels. On the one hand, there is the distortion of the cultural identity on behalf of the religion. On the other hand, the trajectory of this protagonist unravels a deeper transformation regarding the gender identity.

The initial identity of Mark, child of a preacher in Malawi, contrasts with this migrant in the European setting. Indeed, the fictional universe reveals that, the once dedicated child actor of a church drama group in Lilongwe has now turn against Christian religion upon arriving in Europe for studies. For instance, he would do some rituals of "purification" in an abandoned church before squatting the place. In addition to that, some sequences show Mark mimicking the preaching style of his father in a way that corresponds to mockery. To understand the transgressive attitude of this character who loved to "dramatize stories from the bible, (...) the power to

make the congregation laugh” (Habila 48). It is important to note that it was rather a way for Mark to escape from the overwhelming religious environment. Mark explains this as follows: “while my friends were out there discovering sports and other interests, I was in the church, always under my father’s watchful eyes” (49). From what precedes, we can infer that the abandoned church becomes a powerful symbol of Mark’s internal conflict. The rituals, a blend of cultural heritage and newfound beliefs, symbolize his struggle to reclaim his identity outside the confines of the church.

In addition, the imitation of his father preaching with exaggerated fervour could mean a hidden resentment for the suffocating presence of the father. This performance can also be interpreted as a catharsis, a way to confront the pain of abandonment and the expectations placed upon him. Here the, the very problem is not the faith; it is rather a matter of excessive parental control, probably in the name of some religious or cultural norms. This control happens to be negative, since it hampers the normal development of the younger Mark. It is important to note that activities with peers contribute to shape the personal identity. So being deprived of this possibility may account for the controverted behaviours of the grown-up Mark now living in Europe. This could suggest that the migratory travel itself is a way for this adolescent to go far from a suffocating sociocultural environment. Traveling reflects his desire to break free from the chains of his father’s legacy. All these contribute to positioning him as a rebel not just against the parental or societal control but also against the cultural norms.

This phase of rebellion and transgression against Mark’s past life in the home country illustrates a real alteration of the former cultural identity and personal identity. The rejection of this past is emblematic of a broader struggle faced by many migrants. This aspect reveals how the phenomenon of identity deconstruction takes another turn, especially regarding migrants with the status of students. In effect, life in Berlin seems to have transformed many African students, comprising Mark, into some people “against the system” (Habila 27). To materialize this change of personality the narrative presents a series of protests in which Mark is actively involved. This raises a series of questions: this character against which system? Is it about the treatment of the migrants or simply the general sociocultural environment in the host country? A possible answer is that Mark’s engagement in violent demonstrations, even those not directly connected to his personal

circumstances, may indicate a broader search for social belonging. Such participations can be interpreted as an attempt to integrate into collective movements that offer a sense of identity and solidarity. It may also function as a means through which he asserts his presence in a societal context that frequently marginalizes individuals who diverge from dominant norms.

Furthermore, regarding Mark's need for recognition, it becomes evident that his physical appearance and mannerisms differ from those generally associated with his status in the home country. This aspect positions this migrant as a figure whose categorization is not easy. Mark's unusual appearance, along with his affiliation with a female partner resembling "a pincushion" (Habla 24), evokes the subcultural figure of a Skinhead. This juxtaposition operates symbolically as a deliberate performance of anti-conformism. It ultimately signals his refusal to comply with the sociocultural expectations from his background, as well as the ones he faces in Europe. His excessive use of alcohol and other substances adds to this stance, since these behaviours cross the moral boundaries of the Western cultural norms. In addition, these choices highlight his rejection of the norms and values that once shaped his early life. Such practices are certainly unimaginable and socially intolerable within the regulatory framework of his home country. Through these gestures, he disrupts the frameworks that seek to define and contain him. In doing so, he exposes the wider diasporic tensions between inherited moral structures and the continual transformation of self in transcultural contexts.

Meanwhile, the transgression becomes a way for Mark to show that he exists and that he could be different. A difference that he can display only in Europe, very far from the African social norms and culture-based identity. That is the reason why he cannot go back to Malawi (Habla 31). Indeed, the unconfessed motive is that he has reverted to a gender identity that his folks in the home country cannot bear. Mark Chinomba was born Marie Chinomba, so the boy is initially a girl, which means that we are dealing with a transgender. The distortion of identity reveals a more complex situation because the transgender protagonist is aware of the confusion provoked by his physical appearance. As the narrative reveals, "He noticed my momentary disorientation and smiled, as if he was used to being mistaken for something he wasn't" (Habla 16). Each encounter with Mark Chinomba seems to unsettle those around him, generating the impression that he conceals an

aspect of his true nature. The identity he presents does not fully persuade others; rather, physical proximity to him evokes an uncanny sense of Marie's presence more than Mark's. This blurring of identities is felt intuitively rather than deduced rationally. This situation creates an atmosphere of ambiguity that challenges conventional notions of selfhood and appearance.

At the same time, we notice that Mark Chinomba is not at ease with his initial gender identity, which he has transformed by adopting some mannerism and having some specific clothing. In fact, such practices would simply be interpreted as violations of cultural and communal codes of conduct. Mark's choices could be read as deliberate acts of resistance that unsettle the identities imposed upon him. Mark Chinomba's characterization in *Travellers* exemplifies the profound effects of migration on identity, particularly for those navigating complex gender identities. The radical transformation of this protagonist may be meant to mediate a powerful commentary on the struggles of self-acceptance, societal rejection, and the search for belonging in a new cultural landscape. Through the experiences of Mark, the narrative addresses broader themes of rebellion, identity, and the quest for authenticity amid the challenges of migration.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study argues that *Travellers* envisions migration not merely as a passage across territorial borders but as an existential threshold that unsettles inherited certainties and demands the continual re-articulation of self. Habila's narrative reveals, with striking clarity, how the migrant's journey becomes a receptacle in which identities are strained, fractured, and remade. Through its nuanced portrayal of characters navigating the fault lines between past affiliations and present realities, the text foregrounds the profound psychic labour required to inhabit transnational spaces marked by racial hostility and structural precarity.

Methodologically, the study's integration of close-reading with transcultural and postcolonial frameworks underscores the novel's capacity to interrogate contemporary migration regimes while also meditating on the mutable nature of identity in a world defined by mobility and ever-shifting borders. What emerges is a vision of migration as a site of epistemic transformation—a space where individuals must continually renegotiate belonging in response to the complex entanglements of memory,

displacement, and cultural encounter. In this sense, *Travellers* stands as both a critique of Europe's fraught treatment of African migrants and a profound reflection on the delicate, dynamic processes through which subjects forge meaning amid the uncertainties of diasporic life.

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