

**THE BURDEN OF RETURN: MIGRATION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND
DEVELOPMENT IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*
AND EMEKA NWABUEZE'S *ECHOES OF MADNESS***

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary Nigerian migration through the metaphor of "greener pastures" as dramatized in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*. In Nigeria, migration is popularly perceived as a search for better economic and social opportunities abroad, and in drama this is often represented through the figure of the educated returnee who is expected to transform the home community with foreign-acquired knowledge and capital. Existing scholarship on Soyinka's and Nwabueze's plays focuses on culture, politics, and tradition, but does not interrogate migration as a household contract and a development problem. This study fills that gap by conducting a comparative textual analysis of the returnee characters in the two plays, focusing on how migration decisions, return, and reintegration are represented and the consequences that follow. The study is anchored on the New Economics of Labor Migration and World-Systems Theory. The analysis reveals that in Nwabueze's play, the returnee violates the household migration contract through individualism and disengagement from community responsibility while in Soyinka's play, the returnee misapplies Western education by choosing conformity to tradition over critical reform. Both outcomes result in personal and communal tragedy and expose the limits of assuming that foreign education automatically translates to national development.

Keywords: Contemporary Migration, Greener Pastures, Returnee, Nigerian Drama, Development.

Introduction

Migration, in Nigeria is rarely discussed as a personal adventure as it is more often seen as a search for "greener pastures," and in practice it functions as a family project. The decision to move is usually collective, with relatives contributing

resources with the expectation of economic relief and social mobility in return. Also, it is a natural human response to move from discomfort toward comfort, but in the Nigerian setting, that movement carries heavy costs as well as benefits. This sensibility is captured in an Igbo proverb quoted by Chinua Achebe in *Arrows of God* and re-echoed by Emeka Nwabueze in *Echoes of Madness*, "the world is like a mask dancing, if you want to see it well, you don't stand in one place." Early migration theory helps explain why that perception persists and according to Ernest Ravenstein, as cited by Massey, Douglas S., Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino, and J. Edward Taylor, "outmigration from the Global South is largely driven by economic pressures rooted in global inequality" (433).

Migration generally describes the movement of persons across an international border or within a state to a new place of residence. Although not all movement is voluntary as some people are forced to leave as refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced persons. Although, some migrants return home, others remain abroad indefinitely or move on to a third country. The reason for migration, in most cases, comes from a gap between present conditions and aspired living standards, and at times from fear of insecurity and instability. Capturing this tendency, Esther Ogbu asserts, "As the world grapples with the problem of terrorism, insurgencies, economic meltdown and recession, so the challenges of migration press hard" (44-45).

Globally, the pattern of migration has been consistent for decades and according to the *World Migration Report 2022*, "for the past 50 years, the United States of America remains the primary destination for migrants at over 51 million international migrants" (13). The same report observes that "the number of international migrants has increased in all UN regions, but has increased to a greater degree in Europe and Asia than in other regions while India has the largest emigrant population with nearly 18 million people living abroad" (13). The Nigerian experience sits within this global trend but has its own pressures as poverty, unemployment, weak infrastructure, and a worsening economy are frequently cited as push factors. According to Eleanor John-Oti and Stephen Gowon John Oti, "migration in Nigeria is not a response to internal socioeconomic and political challenges but also a reflection of global mobility trends" (3).

Despite stricter immigration rules abroad and public protests against migrants, many Nigerian youths still seek to relocate and which prompts some to take irregular routes across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, where they face trafficking, exploitation, and death. According to the International Organization for Migration, as cited by Olusegun Odunlami, Joseph Odigie and Abimbola Oluyemi, "an estimated 5,000 deaths occurred along these routes in 2023" (34). Moreso, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons also reported that "over 1,000 Nigerians were deported within six months in 2017" (2). Whereas, legal migration follows the host country's requirements and time limits, and it is generally

orderly and documented, irregular migration, on the other hand, often involves smuggling and trafficking, and it exposes migrants to far greater risk. In Nigeria, while legal pathways are slowly expanding, yet the urgency to escape hardship continues to push many toward dangerous alternatives. The consequences of this movement Eleanor and Stephen affirm are mixed, "the impact of migration is both positive and negative while remittances from the Nigerian diaspora play a vital role for reducing poverty, stabilizing household, supporting local economies, technology sharing, trade facilitations, and global integration, the negative phenomenon is brain drain" (3-4). This is clearly evident in the last decade, for instance, the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria reported that "over 9,000 doctors left for the UK, US, and Canada between 2016 and 2022" (3). On the economic side, the Central Bank of Nigeria notes that "over 70% of remittances go to household consumption rather than investment" (6).

Despite the uncertainty surrounding migration, demand for migration remains high. For instance, the United Kingdom Home Office revealed that it received more than 230,000 visa applications from Nigerians across all categories in 2024. In the first half of 2024 alone, over 225,000 UK visas were processed in Nigeria. Also, Nigeria also ranked 4th globally for visitor visa applications with 164,200 submissions and 4th for study visas with 29,700 applications. Furthermore, the Centre for Global Development further reports that Nigeria ranked 6th among top remittance recipients in 2018, underscoring how central migrant contributions have become to the home economy. These figures, from the foregoing, show migration as both a survival strategy and an indicator of structural gaps at home. This study therefore examines voluntary international migration among Nigerians with a focus on those who return after their stay abroad.

Since Nigerian drama uses the figure of the educated returnee to interrogate migration as a household contract and a crisis of national responsibility, it is within this socio-economic reality that this study situates Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*. Both plays dramatize educated young men who return from abroad to face expectations from family and community and while existing scholarship has read these texts through culture and politics, it has not sufficiently examined them as literary engagements with migration as a developmental problem. This study therefore examines how both plays represent migration as a crisis of responsibility and return, and what their tragedies suggest about the limits of foreign education for national development.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Nigerian migration establishes it as a social, economic, and moral contract rather than mere movement. Three strands of scholarship are relevant to this study: migration as lived experience, migration as household strategy, and migration as a product of global inequality. Firstly, in studies of lived

experience, scholars emphasize the social drivers of contemporary migration. Aderanti Adepoju argues that "West African migration is historically circular and family-based, and that contemporary youth migration is intensified by 'the perception of hopelessness at home'" (12). Similarly, Michael Okunola contends that "japa," the Nigerian term for migration, "is not only about money but about dignity and the desire to escape a 'country that does not work'" (594). Ifeoma Onyeonoru further adds that migration in Nigeria "is driven by a crisis of the state and the collapse of social contracts" (45). From the foregoing, these readings shift the focus from economics alone to politics, dignity, and state failure as push factors. Secondly, in studies of the household economy, migration is seen as a collective investment. According to John Ouch, "households invest in migration as a livelihood strategy and expect remittances and social mobility in return" (89). Similarly, Ngozi Uwakwe, in her study of Igbo migration, confirms that "families sell land and assets to send one member abroad with the expectation of future benefits" (112). From the above, explanation on why people leave, who pays for it and what is expected in return is provided. Thirdly, in world-systems analysis, migration is located within global structures of inequality. In the words of Claude Ake "Nigeria's peripheral position in the global economy forces its skilled labor to migrate to the core for survival" (67). Also, according to Bade Onimode "underdevelopment in Nigeria is a product of its integration into the capitalist world system, which promotes the outward migration of human capital"(23). Consequently, migration is not simply a national problem but a global one.

Within Nigerian literary studies, the figure of the educated returnee has received attention, but largely outside migration frameworks. Yet if, as Femi Osofisan argues, "Nigerian theatre functions as 'a public tribunal' where society tries its contradictions," (23), then plays featuring the educated returnee are precisely where migration's contradictions, brain drain versus brain gain, cultural alienation versus expertise get examined.

There is no shortage of literature of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. For instance, James Oyinlade sees it as "a clash between European colonial authority and Yoruba tradition" (34). According to Biodun Jeyifo it is "an exploration of tension between individual will and communal duty" (112). Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness* has been treated the same way. Cindy Ezeugwu calls it "a drama of psychic violence" (27), Odii Nwani sees it as "satire on post-military Nigerian politics" (45), and Christopher Obadiogwu points to how Nwabueze uses "Igbo cosmology to critique leadership failure" (78). Despite this rich scholarship, two gaps remain. First, migration studies on Nigeria have focused on data, remittances, and policy, with little attention to how drama stages the moral expectations of migration. Second, literary criticism of Soyinka and Nwabueze has prioritized culture, ritual, and politics, but has not engaged migration theory to read the returnee as a developmental actor. This

study addresses that gap by examining both plays through the New Economics of Labor Migration and World-Systems Theory.

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is set in Oyo during the colonial period and is based on a historical incident. The play centers on Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman, whose sacred duty is to commit ritual suicide and accompany the deceased king to the afterlife. The conflict begins when Mr. Pilkings, the British District Officer, arrests Elesin to prevent the rite, which he considers primitive. Elesin's detention causes him to miss the appointed time for the transition. His eldest son, Olunde, returns from studies in England to perform his father's burial rites as custom demands. Upon learning of his father's failure and detention, Olunde assumes the duty and commits the ritual suicide himself. Confronted with his son's corpse and his own failure to the community, Elesin takes his life in detention.

Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*, on the other hand is set in a contemporary Igbo community and examines the homecoming of Obiora Nnadozie. Obiora returns from academic work in the United States with his American wife, Brenda, after securing employment in Nigeria. Unknown to him, the community and its oracle have appointed him the Chief Priest of Avuja. Obiora's refusal to accept the office initiates a series of crises. The play depicts political manipulation, the contestation of oracular authority, and mounting communal pressure. The tragedy culminates in the death of Brenda, Obiora's descent into depression, and the murder of Akamonye.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories, the New Economics of Labor Migration and World-Systems Theory.

The New Economics of Labor Migration, as propounded by Oded Stark and Douglas Massey, shifts the focus of migration from the individual to the household. According to Douglas S. Massey, Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino, and J. Edward Taylor, "migration decisions are not made by isolated individuals, but collectively by families as a risk-diversification and income-maximizing strategy" (439). Consequently, the family invests in the migration of one member with the expectation of economic and social returns in the form of remittances, prestige, and support. Oded Stark asserts that "the migrant is therefore bound by a moral contract to reciprocate the investment made on his behalf" (64). In the Nigerian context, this theory explains migration patterns documented by Aderanti Adepoju, who states that "Nigerian households commonly sponsor members abroad as a collective strategy to manage risk, access capital, and secure remittances (39). Within families, failure to remit or "return home" is often interpreted as a breach of this implicit contract and can attract social sanctions, reinforcing New Economics of Labour Migration's emphasis on reciprocity and household obligation.

On the other hand, World-Systems Theory, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, explains migration as a product of structural inequality in the global capitalist system. As cited by Christopher Chase-Dunn, Wallerstein argues for a "division between the 'core' nations and the 'periphery' nations, where economic disparity, underdevelopment, and unequal exchange push people from the periphery to the core in search of better opportunities" (24). Similarly, Saskia Sassen contends that "migration is therefore viewed not merely as an individual or household choice, but as a consequence of globalization and the integration of peripheral economies into the world market" (9). In relation to Nigeria, World Systems Theory, Kenneth Omeje believes "accounts for the country's peripheral position in the world economy, characterized by dependence on oil exports and unequal trade relations that limit domestic opportunities" (480). This structural context helps explain the widespread quest for foreign education and "greener pastures," as well as the difficulty of translating diaspora skills and capital into national development due to systemic underdevelopment and global inequality.

Therefore, the New Economics of Labor Migration and World-Systems serve as a guide for reading migration in *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Echoes of Madness*. Whereas New Economics of Labour Migration captures migration as a household moral economy, World-Systems Theory situates that household decision within Nigeria's broader position in the global system.

Analysis

Anchoring on the New Economics of Labor Migration and World-Systems Theory, this section examines Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, alongside Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*, to interrogate migration, foreign education, and the crisis of return. The discussion is organized thematically around household investment, the failure of return, and the limits of Western education in the Nigerian context.

Migration as Household Investment and Expected Returns

The New Economics of Labor Migration sees migration as a household strategy rather than an individual choice. This is clear in both plays. In *Echoes of Madness*, Obiora's trip to the United States is funded by the collective sacrifice of his family:

CHINWE: *You should be sorry for yourself Obiora. We sold the family land to send you abroad. We were foolish, we could have known better. We could have known that there would be no benefit in that action (20).*

Similarly, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Olunde's education in England is facilitated by Mr. Pilkings:

PILKINGS: ...I helped his son get to a medical school in England, remember? I literally had to help the boy escape from close confinement and load him into the next boat. A most intelligent boy, really bright (28).

Both protagonists travel for “pastures new” and academic advancement. *Obiora* confirms this motive:

OBIORA: You were celebrating my return. I mean, you were welcoming a deserving son back from his academic campaigns abroad (12).

In both plays, migration is therefore determined not solely by the individual, but by family, patrons, and communal expectations.

The Crisis of Return: Disengagement vs. Misapplied Education

On return, both protagonists face the moral contract of reciprocity, but respond differently, leading to a crisis. *Obiora* embodies disengagement. After fifteen years abroad, he refuses to honor the communal expectation to become Chief Priest.

CHINWE: After 15 years in foreign country, the only thing we get from you is insult. How has your sojourn abroad improved the lot of this family (19)?

Despite his claim:

OBIORA: It is stupid for people to run away from their country instead of staying to put things in order (36).

He immediately plans to abandon his village:

OBIORA: In two days time, I'm gonna get down to the capital and tie up that job. Then I'm gonna move down to the wharf and clear those containers of ours. Then we gotta rent a house and get out of this village (15).

When confronted, he takes the escapist route:

OBIORA: That's no business of mine...leave public problems to take care of themselves. This is Africa (15-16).

Olunde, in contrast, represents misapplied education. He returns from England not to reform but to uphold tradition:

OLUNDE: That's why I want to see him. He's wasting his time. And since he has been helpful to me I don't want him to incur the enmity of our people (52).

Whereas *Obiora's* failure is rooted in individualistic withdrawal, *Olunde's* is rooted in communal over-identification. Both, however, violate the implicit New Economics

of Labour Migration contract by failing to convert foreign capital into home development. Lastly, the inability of returnees to reciprocate is further questioned by Ugodie:

UGODIE: Perhaps, the America you went to is different from that which other people in this country go to (39).

Global Inequality and the Limits of Foreign Education

World-Systems Theory explains why Western education fails to resolve local problems in both plays. The protagonists return from the "core" (host nation) with knowledge that proves inadequate in the "periphery" (home nation).

In *Echoes of Madness*, *Ifeanyi* captures the national mentality of escape:

IFEANYI: Right. I didn't even know you were back. One wonders why a person would return to this country when everyone is looking for an opportunity to get out (34).

He also affirms:

IFEANYI: Why do you think people send their wives to have children abroad to have a foreign citizenship? Everyone is seeing an opportunity of obtaining foreign nationality... if I ever get to that place, I'll say goodbye to this country forever (35).

Similarly, *Jane Pilkings* also questions the purpose of *Olunde's* foreign training:

JANE: I see. So it isn't just medicine that you studied in England (53).

However, both plays expose the limits of this logic. Obiora's American education does not equip him to mediate his family's crisis. Likewise, *Olunde's* medical training in England is powerless before Yoruba cosmology. Both cases show that education acquired in the core cannot be transplanted wholesale into the periphery without addressing structural and cultural realities.

Tragedy as Critique of the Migration Project

Both plays end in tragedy and use this to critique migration without responsibility. In *Echoes of Madness*, Obiora's refusal to reciprocate leads to his destruction. While he claims to want to transform his people, he returns with nothing but his personal belongings. In the words of Cindy Ezeugwu, "Obiora is a victim of "psychic violence" leading to neurosis" (28). This can further be interpreted as karmic retribution for his refusal to give back to the community. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Olunde's* blind adherence to tradition leads to the death of both him and his father.

The tragedies reflect that migration is not an escape route but a contract. Both plays therefore anticipate Nigeria's contemporary "japa" discourse, warning that

migration without a development agenda for home reproduces the very underdevelopment it seeks to escape. Through tragedy, Soyinka and Nwabueze argue that change is not coerced, but a society that cannot interrogate its traditions or demand accountability from its elites is doomed to collapse.

Conclusion

This study has examined migration, foreign education, and the crisis of return in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness* anchored on the New Economics of Labor Migration and World-Systems Theory.

The analysis shows that migration in both plays is framed as a household investment with an expectation of reciprocity. However, the crisis of return emerges when returnees fail to convert foreign-acquired capital into home development. In *Echoes of Madness*, Obiora's disengagement illustrates how individualistic withdrawal violates the household contract while in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Olunde's over-identification with tradition reveals how even a return premised on duty can become destructive when it ignores structural realities. Both cases affirm the argument of New Economics of Labour Migration that migration without return benefits to the sending unit creates moral and social rupture. Moreso, based on World-Systems perspective, the plays further demonstrate that education obtained in the core (host nation) cannot be transplanted wholesale into the periphery (home nation). Therefore, the inability of both protagonists to effect meaningful change underscores how global inequality limits the utility of Western education in the Nigerian context. Consequently, their tragic ends therefore function as a critique of migration severed from communal responsibility. The contemporary relevance of this critique is clear. The persistent "japa" syndrome among Nigerian youths, the rise of illegal migration, and the ostentatious lifestyles of some returnees reflect the same disconnect dramatized in both plays. Until migration is reimagined as a development strategy rather than an escape route, Nigeria will continue to experience the poverty of ideas and infrastructure that fuels further exodus.

Recommendations

To reposition migration as a tool for national development, this study proposed the following:

1. Government responsibility: The state must provide a habitable environment with basic amenities and economic opportunities to reduce the push factors for migration.
2. Civic re-orientation: Returnees and diaspora Nigerians should be sensitized to see development as a collective project, not just family uplift. Development, like Rome, is not built in a day, and the benefits enjoyed abroad were products of collective sacrifice.

3. Policy engagement: A platform should be created for youths in the diaspora to participate in national politics and development planning, so that migration becomes a brain gain rather than brain drain.

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