



**POST MIGRANT REALITIES AND THE NOTION OF REVERSE MIGRATION: A  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DOREEN BAINGANA'S *TROPICAL FISH: TALES FROM  
ENTEBBE* AND MBOLO MBUE'S *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS***

**STEPHEN AYOK SHARON**

Department of English and Literary Studies

Bingham University, Karu

[stephen.ayok@binghamuni.edu.ng](mailto:stephen.ayok@binghamuni.edu.ng)



<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8867-5224>

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the complexities of African diasporic identities, focusing on the notion of reverse migration in the novels of Doreen Baingana and Imbolo Mbue. Diaspora fiction, emphasizing the construction of identities in multiple locations, reveals the intricate dynamics between 'homeland' and 'host land.' The binary perspective of these locations gives rise to hybrid identities, a blend of cultural elements from both the homeland and the host culture. The paper examines communalism, names, dressing, spiritualism, language use, and food as defining features of traditional African societies, demonstrating their enduring impact despite colonialism's erosion. Baingana and Mbue depict the struggles and survival experiences of immigrants in a foreign land, shedding light on unrecognized barriers and emphasizing the interconnectedness of immigrants with their illusionary world.*

**KEY WORDS:** Africa, Hybridity Identity, Migration, Reverse

**Introduction**

Diaspora fiction explores the narratives of communities that have been uprooted from their ancestral lands through migration or exile, focusing on how identities are forged across different locations. This genre examines the interplay between 'homeland' and 'host land,' revealing that the relationship between these two spaces is not simply one of stark contrast. Migrants often retain a deep connection to their homeland while simultaneously integrating aspects of their host culture, creating a unique, hybrid identity a concept championed by theorists like Homi Bhabha. The new wave of African diaspora writers exemplifies this phenomenon, including Taiye Selasi, Mbolo Mbue, Noviolet Bulawayo, Doreen Baingana, and many others. These authors, having grown up in Africa before moving to Europe or America, bring their rich cultural and educational experiences to their work. Their proximity to Western publishing

enables them to authentically share their journeys and depict the complex realities of their communities both in their countries of origin and in their new, adopted environments. In "Race & Racisms: A Critical Approach," Tanya Golash-Boza emphasizes that migration has been a perpetual aspect of human history. The discourse on immigration typically differentiates between two groups: the 'old immigrants' who arrived in the early 1800s, and the 'new immigrants' who came in the late 1800s. The former were primarily driven by the search for better job opportunities, whereas the latter were attracted by the potential for economic advancement during a time of significant industrial expansion in the United States. This wave of played a crucial role in shaping a multicultural society.

However, modern immigrants face numerous challenges, with documentation being a primary concern. Many immigrants are overlooked and struggle to establish themselves in a foreign

land. Despite these difficulties, the United States has flourished through diverse waves of migration. Although, immigrants may feel a sense of something lost, as they can never fully experience the feeling of being at home in a foreign country. Undocumented immigrants, often labeled as "illegal aliens," significantly contribute to the U.S. economy through their investments, consumption of goods and services, and by filling essential roles that boost job creation and productivity. Contrary to the widespread belief that their presence in the U.S. is inherently criminal, the legalities surrounding immigration are intricate. The United States, celebrated as a "nation of immigrants," has long held this global identity. As observed by Jean de Crevecoeur, an 18th-century French American writer, America has historically been a melting pot where people from diverse nations merge to form a new, distinct race.

Exploring the identities of the African diaspora in literature unveils the complex processes of individuals and communities navigating new cultural identities to establish a sense of belonging. Literature, as a potent medium, plays a vital role in understanding and expressing diverse cultural experiences. This exploration of the African cultural identity within the new African diaspora centers on two narratives by African migrant writers, Doreen Baingana and Mbolo Mbue. These selected works examine the intricacies of diasporic experiences and identity formation, particularly within the context of reverse migration. **With a focus on cultural identity within the African diaspora. Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity introduces two distinct positions: one emphasizing shared culture, history, and ancestry, and the other recognizing critical points of deep and significant difference, reflecting what individuals have become over time. Cultural identity, particularly the African identity in the context of the new African diaspora, is viewed not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic and transformative construct shaped by historical interventions, particularly migration.** Bhabha's notion, as articulated in *The*

*Location of Culture*, posits that when different cultures intersect, a new hybrid form emerges. The study emphasizes the interconnectedness of immigrants with their illusionary world, stating how Immigrants may face unrecognized barriers. Hence, both authors, Doreen Baingana from Uganda, and Mbolo Mbue, an immigrant from Cameroon, portray the struggles and survival experiences of immigrants in a foreign land through their literary works. Baingana's and Mbue's narratives in the context of African diasporic identities underscore the complexities and challenges faced by African migrants. The examination of cultural identity, hybridity, and the impact of historical narratives contributes to a nuanced understanding of the diasporic experience. Through their literary works, these African migrant writers offer valuable insights into the issues of identity formation and the pursuit of dreams in the face of reverse migration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study draws on the insights provided by Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues in "The Post-colonial Studies Reader." They emphasize that post-colonial theory encompasses discussions on various experiences, including migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to imperial Europe's master discourses. This study specifically explores the movement of migrants to a new location with diverse cultures and races. The study relies on the postcolonial concept of hybridity, as proposed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* and his interview on "The Third Space" with Jonathan Rutherford. Stuart Hall's perspectives on identity formation among diasporic subjects, as presented in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," are also crucial to the study. Both Bhabha and Hall focus on identity formation in individuals who engage with different cultures, a central concern in this research.

Hybridity, according to Bhabha, represents the 'third space,' a productive and ambivalent zone where cultural statements and systems are shaped. This space displaces established histories, fostering

new structures of authority and political initiatives. The production of new identities by minorities, such as African immigrants in diaspora does not imply assimilation, as argued by Bhabha and supported by Faist. Bhabha contends that when people move to new locations, they undergo transformations in various aspects of their lives. This includes changes in physical appearance, language, mannerisms, dress, reasoning, and character, all observable in the African immigrants examined in the selected texts. Hall views cultural identity as a collection of self-identities shared among individuals with common historical experiences and cultural codes. An African immigrant's self-identity mirrors their cultural identity, encompassing language, dressing, food, relationships, mannerisms, character, and physical appearance. Both Bhabha and Hall emphasize the fluid nature of cultural identity, leading to constant transformations. The study focuses on African migrant characters whose identities consistently produce themselves anew through transformation and difference when interacting with the western culture, forming what Hall terms "Diaspora identities." Hybridity is seen as a conscious and strategic process, according to Bhabha, involving the voluntary fusion of different cultural values. African immigrants undergo voluntary hybridization as they engage with diasporic spaces.

### **Navigating the Challenges Faced by Migrants**

Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* serves as a poignant exploration of the realities faced by African migrants, with a focus on the lower class, challenging stereotypical narratives often presented by older novelists like Adichie. The novel captures the optimism and possibilities that the United States represents for migrants, juxtaposed with the illusory nature of the American Dream in the face of economic downturns. The narrative also sheds light on the paradoxical pursuit of dreams by both American and migrant characters. Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* has earned overwhelming praise for its candid analysis of the less advantageous angles of the "American Dream," told

through the juxtaposition of Cameroonian immigrants and their wealthy, white-American counterparts. While almost every reviewer lauded the novel for the unique perspective it brought to an important time in recent American history, some had issues with how Mbue built her characters, most of whom wanted the characters to be more fleshed out. The United States is no stranger to immigrants and the trials that they face. Immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers alike have long made the journey to the United States in search of a better, safer life for their families and a fresh start with "endless opportunities." They flee their homes from persecution and do not carry much with them. However, oftentimes these individuals become so transfixed by the fictional grand lure of the "American Dream," that the immense challenges lying ahead of them go unchecked, or overlooked, sometimes causing a dangerously slippery slope of destruction or worse deportation. The divisive nature of the American political climate creates an even greater challenge for contemporary migrants, as immigration and border security have become a central focus of the current administration and sparked a worldwide debate on issues of immigration.

Jende Jonga, the central figure in the novel, migrates from Cameroon to America with his wife Neni and their young son Liomi, driven by hopes of a brighter future and promising opportunities. Their decision to move to the United States is a significant leap of faith, marked by substantial sacrifices. Despite financial hardships, Jende and Neni embark on their new life in New York, eagerly awaiting the crucial "papers" that would grant them permanent residence in their adopted country. Their lives become entwined with the affluent families they work for, relying on their employers' wealth to sustain them. Strikingly, Jende and Neni's narrative trajectories could be said to reflect Paul Gilroy's insight on migration in *The Black Atlantic* that, "the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—

provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory” (16).

In their pursuit of stability, Jende faces challenges during a job interview where the focus is not on his qualifications but on his immigration status. This highlights the immense importance placed on legal documentation over professional credentials for job prospects in the United States. Jende's sarcastic comment about the slow nature of immigration processes reflects the frustrations faced by immigrants, mocking the delayed and often complex procedures. The author portrays that it is not easy to obtain a green card in America. She expresses those things when Jende Jonga was unable to get his papers. Here Bubakar shows the outcome of the paper, "A few years?" Bubakar asked in mock shock. "How about thirty years? I know people who've been fighting Immigration forever (72). Immigration proves to be a formidable challenge for African migrants entering the United States. Even with Bubakar, a renowned immigration lawyer, Jende cannot secure the necessary papers. The novel sheds light on the struggles faced by immigrants, not only with documentation but also concerning their families, particularly their children's education and character development. Neni's distress over Liomi's education and Mrs. Edwards' critique of immigrant children's behavior underscores the societal challenges faced by African migrants in nurturing their families while adapting to a foreign culture. Despite leaving Cameroon for a better life, the Jonga family grapples with concerns about their children's future in a land that poses educational and societal challenges. The author, Imbolo Mbue, uses the novel to emphasize the significance of education, mirroring the programs sponsored by the United States in Cameroon. However, the struggles persist, indicating that the pursuit of the American dream is not without its hurdles, especially for African immigrants.

The narrative parallels Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which depicts African immigrants pursuing

the American dream for a better life through hard work. Both works highlight the sacrifices made for survival, with the immigrants willing to sacrifice anything, including their lives. The novel underscores the cruel nature of the American immigration system, revealing the emotional toll it takes on those seeking a new life. The author, through the character of Jende, criticizes the American government, emphasizing the unpredictability and lengthy battles faced by immigrants seeking legal status. The struggles depicted in the novel reflect the inherent instability of undocumented status, exposing immigrants to constant deportation risks and hindering their integration into the American society. The phenomenon of undocumented status, often termed "unauthorized" or "illegal," has unintentionally emerged as a consequence of the evolution of legal statuses over the past century. Immigrants, enveloped in American ideology and culture, face significant challenges when confronted with orders from the American government, exemplified in the narrative of Jende and Neni. Their reluctance to comply with the government's directives underscores the inevitability faced by impoverished migrants, compelled to make decisions when denied proper documentation. Imbolo Mbue adeptly captures the immigrant experience, revealing the hidden struggles of a family striving for a better life. Jende, disillusioned with living in a country that rejects him, attempts to persuade his wife, Neni, to abandon their American dream. Despite Jende's conviction that it is better to endure hardships in one's homeland, Neni remains steadfast in her aspiration to live in the United States. Jende, having lost interest in a foreign land, contemplates a return to Cameroon with the earnings he has accumulated. Interestingly, Neni's determination to fulfill her dream leads her to consider marrying someone else for papers, showcasing the lengths to which immigrants go to navigate the complexities of the U.S. immigration system. This revelation, particularly in the character of Neni, highlights the harsh realities faced by immigrant women who may



resort to marrying for the sake of obtaining legal documents.

Assimilation, a crucial process in immigrant life, presents challenges when individuals become accustomed to a foreign culture. Migrants grapple with linguistic challenges, attempting to balance their native languages with the linguistic norms of the new environment. In *Tropical Fish*, Christine narrates that she chooses to remain silent as any attempt to talk leaves her voice dry, feeling strange and invokes pity and impatience among those around her. Elsewhere at L.A. Café, she dares not talk in attempt to conceal her identity. The Jonga family, as black immigrants, also grapples with various forms of suppression and discrimination, choosing not to confront landlords or superiors. Jende's compliance with Mrs. Edwards' unusual request, despite recognizing the potential job loss, exemplifies the power dynamics immigrants often face in their pursuit of survival in America. Another study by Wyman, titled "Feeding on Truth; Living with Lies: The Role of Food in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*", explores the themes of truth and lies through the lens of food. It reveals the cost disparities between American and Cameroonian food, emphasizing the economic challenges faced by African migrants in diaspora. Assimilation, a crucial process in immigrant life, presents challenges when individuals become accustomed to a foreign culture. The Jonga family, as black immigrants, grapples with various forms of suppression and discrimination, choosing not to confront landlords or superiors. Jende's compliance with Mrs. Edwards' unusual request, despite recognizing the potential job loss, exemplifies the power dynamics immigrants often face in their pursuit of survival in America.

Furthermore, In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the narrative revolves around a black family's relentless efforts to secure a stable life within the middle class. This thematic parallel resonates with Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*, where the character Jende strives to establish stability amid the affluent class. Both

works shed light on the significance of financial stability in the survival of black individuals. Lorraine Hansberry explains the struggles faced by migrants in *A Raisin in the Sun* as she poignantly addresses the economic struggles of migrants through the characters Mama and Walter, who discuss how priorities in life have shifted from seeking freedom to valuing money. This dialogue vividly captures their financial challenges. Likewise, Imbolo Mbue's novel offers a deep dive into her experiences as an immigrant, specifically focusing on the difficulties faced by Africans in the United States. The story sheds light on the disillusionment immigrants often face when they arrive in an idealized land, only to confront harsh realities. The central character, Jende, experiences several job transitions from dishwasher to chauffeur illustrating the grueling and costly pursuit of a green card. This narrative provides a rich exploration of the arduous and expensive journey migrants endure in their quest for a better life.

### **The Notion of Reverse Migration**

Returning to one's country of origin can occur in two forms: psychologically, through memories, or physically, through actual travel. When African migrants go back home, they encounter a unique opportunity to reengage with their homeland. However, this homecoming is often challenging, as returnees must navigate the complexities of reintegrating into their native society. Although they maintain a distinct sense of self-identity, many eventually adapt to the expectations and norms of their homeland. In the context of reverse migration, Mary Linda Vivian Onuoha's study on "Acculturation and African Identity in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* examines how the protagonists struggle to assimilate into American culture. Facing difficulties in blending in, they ultimately find comfort by reconnecting with their African roots, highlighting the challenges of integrating into a new culture while preserving one's identity. For immigrants, reconnecting with their homeland extends beyond just physical return. Many engage with their African roots through

various means such as travel, phone calls, writing, imagination, and memories. African immigrants, particularly those whose residency status is precarious, often choose virtual returns via media and the internet. They live in constant concern about their reintegration into their homeland. Preparing for their return, these migrants frequently keep in touch with friends and relatives in their countries of origin through writing, calling, and internet platforms like Skype. Jean-Pierre Cassarino, in his article "Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited," argues that such interactions before returning "allow their return to be better prepared and organised" (262). This explains why Jonga consistently made calls to his brother to inform him of his decision to return back to Limbe in Cameroon. On the contrary, Neni Jende's wife plans her return by shopping for essential items that would make her feel she is still in America even after her return to Limbe "these purchases were what she would use to prove to lose women of Limbe that she was not their level" (381).

Despite the expectation that returnees would distinguish themselves through their experiences abroad, their unique self-identity is not always accepted by the locals. Often, African returnees face ridicule for their transformed identities. This feeling of alienation is also echoed in *Tropical Fish* upon Christine's arrival in Uganda after living in America for eight years. She comes face-to-face with the reality of the appalling conditions of her homeland. She notices how scattered and weak the town lights are in comparison to the brilliant lights of Washington, the plane to Entebbe is congested and unkempt, the runway is neglected making planes get stuck in mud, the airport looks like "an abandoned barn" (121) and the offices are dull and empty with arrogant staff. The homeland presents challenges and the returnees feel alienated. Christine has to endure scornful laughter from both her family and colleagues. The receptionist at the Ministry of Justice even makes mocking jokes about the reasons for Christine's return. Her American accent

becomes a source of amusement for her mother and sister, while the baggage clerk at the airport gives her a disparaging look. Additionally, her boss ridicules her preference for plant-based meals, treating her choices as if they were commonplace and unsophisticated. She faces obstacles in securing accommodation and employment, establishing a social network, meeting the high expectations of extended family members, and adapting to the deficient infrastructural facilities in her country. These difficulties create a sense of homelessness, despite being in her native land, leading her to feel nostalgic about her American home. The excessive demands placed on her, having interacted with a more socio-economically developed society like the United States, instill apprehension and a reluctance to engage closely with locals.

To overcome these challenges, the transformed African migrants exhibit flexibility in the types of jobs they accept, especially in the initial stages of their return. However, she often finds dissatisfaction with certain shortcomings in public service, openly expressing her discontentment and, at times, being compelled to resign on ethical grounds. While the African diasporic migrant returning home is expected to possess a distinct self-identity and is occasionally forgiven for exhibiting American behaviors, their uniqueness is not always accommodated. Christine expresses impatience with the discourteous secretary at the Ministry of Justice and is unsettled by the cold reception from Mr. Oduro, who previously worked with her boss in the Commission office. She is particularly disturbed by the blatant embezzlement of government funds and questions why those responsible for managing accounts are not held accountable. However, Christine's concerns are met with disapproval from her mother, who dismissively reminds her that "This isn't America" (143). The widespread unethical conduct in public offices causes frustration among returnees and strains their relationships with those who engage in such practices. For Jende, he is not particularly concerned about Successful reintegration into his homeland. His concern is

enjoying home again rather than getting worried about the socio-economic state of his homeland as he has lost hope in any government ‘One can never trust any government- I don’t trust the American government and I definitely don’t trust the Cameroon government” (380) the foregoing suggests that the likes of Jende, will not find it difficult to adapt to the changes they will encounter upon their return.

In conclusion, both texts serve as a commentary on the complexity of the immigrant experience and suggests that, in the end, the American government cannot be trusted. The voluntary departure and return to Cameroon and Uganda, underscore the challenges and disillusionment faced by immigrants, ultimately questioning the trustworthiness of the American government compared to their native country. The authors’ skillful portrayal of these complexities demonstrates the nuanced and intricate nature of reverse migration.

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