

Diasporic Nationalism and the Challenges of Life in Bayo Alawiye's "*The Edge*"

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Abstract

Many Nigerian youths consistently have the mindset of travelling out of the country to America, Europe or Asia for greener pastures. This twenty-first century phenomenon is now a tag on Nigeria's national identity as the country's youths demonstrate the urge to travel out of the country at the slightest opportunity. The phenomenal urge to travel out of the country has attracted the attention of policy makers and other stake holders such as Nollywood in the evaluation of life's challenges that Nigerians face while foraging in their supposedly greener pastures. Bayo Alawiye's *The Edge* provides the textual reference for the Nollywood's intervention in Nigeria's diasporic nationalism among Nigerians abroad and the challenges of life these migrants face in their host countries. The film narrates the ordeals of cousins in America and how other Nigerian migrants in America demonstrate different degrees of nationalism to protect their individual and national interests. Despite the challenges that Nigerians face in America, Europe and Asia, they still hold on to the hope that they will make it in their host communities. The economic and political problems in Nigeria demotivate Nigerians to stay at home for the country's redemption. They (Nigerians),

therefore, strive to migrate abroad to ‘enjoy’ better social and economic opportunities.

Keywords: Diasporic nationalism, Nollywood and national consciousness, double consciousness and nation building

Introduction

Nigeria’s cinematic landscape reveals some improvement in Nollywood (a name for Nigeria’s film industry) films. This improvement is seen in the contemporaneity and topicality of film genres produced in the country. In the contemporary time, Nollywood filmmakers have demonstrated their creative ingenuity acquired through formal and informal training in the art and business of filmmaking. The robustness of film genres of Nollywood has also had credence to the relevance and social significance of Nollywood films. Among the popular genres of Nollywood films is travelogue/trans-national migration. Filmmakers adopt different narratives and points of view to express their different travelling experiences.

In the past with specific references to the 80’s and 90’s, Nollywood filmmakers make films such as *Baba Londoner* and *Usofia in London* to make their fans know their latest achievements and breakthrough in their chosen profession. These films are comic with no cogent ethical and ideological orientation. In the recent time, however, Nollywood filmmakers have now re-focused the ideological orientation of their films which focus on trans-national migration. Films such as *Okola ni America*, *Omo Dubai*, *Iwe Igbelu* and *The Edge* creatively present the challenges Nigerians face in their desire to migrate to America, Europe and Asian countries. These films also present the experiences of these migrants in their host countries. In these films, among others, migration becomes the trope of discourse. This paper, therefore, upholds Ajibola’s (2018, p. 128) view that “migration is one of the defining realities of the present times, owing to the forces of

globalisation which have fostered faster and safer means of transportation and communication, which have in no small measure encouraged movement from one continent to another". This intercontinental movement has redefined nationality of individuals in their native countries as well as in the host communities. This redefinition is often seen in self-perception and societal reception of their personalities and identities in the host countries. In some instances, the migrants who constitute diasporic population in the host countries usually have meaner economic and sociological experiences in their host countries.

For our purpose in this paper, Bayo Alawiye's *The Edge* is used to critique the nature and intricacies of trans-national migration of Nigerians to the United States of America. One interesting thing about the film is that it does not start with the conventional Nollywood approach to trans-national migration. The conventional Nollywood narrative of trans-national migration is that of a young person that has recently suffered a misfortune and he/she is desperate to travel out of the country. Instead of this young person to look for alternative means of survival in the country, he/she is always of the opinion that leaving the country for Europe/America/Asia is always the solution to the problem.

Bayo Alawiye's *The Edge* presents the story of young men (cousins) who face different challenges while helping each other in America. The blurb of the film reveals it to be a film which is based on true life experience of Nigerians in the diaspora to find a greener pasture abroad. The film, therefore, interrogates some sociological variables such as family ties and urban dislocations which affect the economic survival of the Diasporans in America and other European countries.

Migration and Diasporic Presence

Diasporic presence is possible with the factors of migration across the continents and countries of the globe. It is on this note that

migration is germane to our discourse on diasporic nationalism in this paper. In a simple form, migration is the movement of people from one place to another for seeking better opportunities elsewhere. From the days of the early man, the *Australopithecus afarensis*, to the times of the modern man, the *Homo sapiens*, migration from one place to another has been part and parcel of human existence (Ajibola, 2018, p. 28). This is to say that migration makes up part of human existence on the surface of the earth. Even from the time of creation, humans (most especially Adam and Eve) migrated from the Garden of Eden as the mark of their experiences.

Migration of people from one place to another has been grouped into voluntary and involuntary categories. What is, however, important is that these categories summarise the major reasons that make people travel from one place to another. Among the reasons for migration is to seek economic opportunities in terms of employment and appointments while some migrate to seek political asylum. Whatever the motive behind international migration, Jennissen (2004, np) classifies migration into four categories such as:

- i. Labour international migration
- ii. Return international migration
- iii. Chain international migration
- iv. Assylum international migration

Labour international migration involves people who voluntarily migrate for the purpose of getting employment in any of the categories of skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labour. Simply put, labour international migration is the transfer of skills from one nation state to another (Okeoghene, 2017, p. 35). Most of the international migrants from developing countries such as Nigeria are found within the brackets of international labour migration. The evidence of this is found in the film with the characterisation

of Dele, Segun, Tope and Bolu. They all travel to America to form what is known as diasporic presence with other migrants to better their economic opportunities through gainful employment. They see their diasporic presence in America as a better option to what is available in their native countries and for this reason, they try everything within their reach to sustain their stay in America.

Return international migration is concerned with the migrants who travel back home after retirement from gainful employment. This form of international migration is no longer popular among Nigerian migrants except among few scholars and professors who return home after working for some years abroad. These professors return home, perhaps, to contribute the little they can to the education of their native countries through contract appointment in some willing universities. It can also be explained as the relocating of migrants back to their respective countries (Okeoghene, 2017, p. 35). We do not have any instance of return migration in the film. In fact, most of the characters are afraid being deported to their home countries as we see in the case of Segun and Dele.

Chain International migration is about re-unification of family members with another family member in the diaspora. This occurs when a family member travels abroad on invitation to join another family member who has been living in the diaspora. There is an instance in the film with the Bolu's invitation to Segun while the latter is preparing for his second journey to America. With this invitation, Segun has no work permit to seek employment in America and to stay beyond six months based on the conditions of his visiting visa.

Asylum international migration is concerned with people who seek refuge after some unpleasant experiences in their home countries. Okeoghene (2017, p. 36) is of the view that this is practiced by

asylum seekers (individuals) that seek refuge in a destination nation state due to frustration and push factors surrounding them in their home countries. They describe themselves as being in need of help and refuge. This is also described as forced international migration. This type of international migration is mostly engaged by refugees, internally displaced persons and others who claim refugee status.

There is no instance of asylum international migration in the film. None of the characters in the film text seeks asylum in America. Important fact in this categorization of international migration is that migration and diasporic presence across the globe is inevitable owing to series of economic and sociological challenges facing countries and continents of the world.

Diasporic Nationalism and Survival of the Fittest

The concept of diasporic nationalism is deducible from the conceptualisation of diaspora which is roughly defined as transnational community that sees members as an entity because of their shared identity. This transnational community demonstrates nationalist fervour because of their shared identity especially based on ethnicity, nationality and race. This situation, therefore, can be regarded as diasporic nationalism. This paper's conceptualisation of diaspora is consistent with Adetugbo's (2001), Babawale's (2008), Matlou's (2009) and Jeter's (2002) conceptualization of the term. The summary of these scholars' description of diaspora is the dispersal of individuals from their native countries to other parts of the globe, most especially from their native countries and continents. Owing to the nature of diasporic movement, the diasporans demonstrate diasporic nationalism especially in trying moments of survival of the fittest in their respective host communities. This is not to say that some

diasporans do not show concern for the survival of their fellow immigrants in the host country. The instances of these categories of immigrants are found in the film text of *The Edge*. For instance, Tope (the cab owner) capitalises on the challenges of living in America that Segun is facing. He (Tope) charges Segun one hundred dollars for driving his cab for eight (8) hours instead of the normal rate of fifty dollars for twelve hours. One critical issue here is that both Tope and Segun are from the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria as evident in their language of conversation. The underlined message here is that the fact that people come from the same family or ethnic group does not mean that they will demonstrate diasporic nationalism in a host country. Looking at this matter from another perspective, however, one can say that Tope is not totally hostile to Segun who migrates to America without work permit (a situation which is very common to many Nigerians who are in the habit of leaving their country in a hurry). Getting to America, Tope provides ready-made assistance to Segun though in an extortionate manner. To this end, we can still discover some elements of diasporic nationalism in the film text.

Many [illegal] migrants in America make different attempts for economic survival to sustain themselves in the country. Apart from driving a cab for economic survival, Segun also enters into a relationship with a young black American lady in order to secure work and residence permit. This situation is one of the recurring experiences of male migrants. In order to get the desired documents to be able to live and work freely in America, most Nigerian male migrants in America engage in contract marriage with a legal resident, usually an American citizen. This is a step that Segun takes discreetly with a black American lady but the whole thing backfires on him. The lady discovers that Segun has no document to make him live and work in America and for this reason she begins to maltreat him (Segun). The following excerpt from the film reveals thus:

Segun: Baby, are you okay? You are drinking. You are quiet. Did somebody upset you? Baby, we will talk about this. Drinking is not good for you.

Debby: What do you think about what is good for me?

Segun: What?

Debby: What do you think about what is good for me? You are in the US. You have not got your papers.

Segun: What are you talking about?

Debby: Do you have your papers?

Segun: What?

Debby: You heard me. Do you have your papers?

The above excerpts and the incidents that follow reveal the traumatic experiences that most Nigerians who travel as illegal immigrant to America usually face in order to have their permits. Though these illegal immigrants such as Segun are not comfortable with the situation, they still feel at home compared to their socio-economic experiences in their respective native countries.

The characterisation and the plot of the film text reveal some fundamental issues which confront most illegal immigrants in the United States of America. Among the challenges that face these illegal immigrants are the tensions and coping strategies which are available for them for socio-economic survival. These tensions and coping strategies have created what Sesan (2015, p. 95) termed “presence-absence continuum”. In his view, presence-absence continuum explains the psychological fondness and physical detachment that the diaspora have for their native countries and host countries. While describing presence-absence continuum, Sesan links it with the concept of ‘in-betweenness’ as revealed below:

Since the diasporans are caught in the web of “in-betweenness”, they always have nostalgia for the natal home and culture. Their whole being is neither here nor there. When the diasporans are physically present in the host community, they are psychologically absent. Similarly in their natal home, they are psychologically present but physically absent. It can thus be said that presence-absence continuum characterizes diasporic imagination that spurs the motif of nostalgia.

The above view indicates that diasporic individuals are trying to cope with trying moments in host communities and this is done with the spirit of fraternity and brotherhood as seen in the characterization of Segun, Dele and Bolu. These characters try all their best to empathise and assist one another in their respective trying moments

The in-betweenness of African migrants in the United States of America is compounded by the hostility they suffer from white people. For instance, Segun’s experience in the hands of Debby is pathetic. This is so when she (Debby) is aware that Segun is an African with no proper documents to work and live in America. In fact, Debby turns Segun to an errand boy and ultimately, she sends him (Segun) out of her apartment. At the end, Segun is deported to Nigeria. While in Nigeria, Segun finds it difficult to cope with living in Nigeria. Segun’s attitude to living in Nigeria is a representation of how some ‘been-tos’ from Nigeria to living in Nigeria. Many of them display detachment from the country, perhaps, because of Nigeria’s unfriendly socio-economic atmosphere.

The filmmaker makes efforts to present the actual social relations which are present in America and why American government and some American citizens because of some of the negative attitude and bad behaviour of many Nigerian

immigrants in the United States of America. When Segun informs Dele of the recent nagging behaviour of Debby, the later (Dele) is objective in his opinion about Debby's behaviour when he says that "no one should blame Debby because some Nigerians have spoilt America with series of corrupt practices". This is one of the critical issues that pose problems for immigrants in their respective home countries. The precedence and previous records of former immigrants always affect the reception and opportunities of prospective and current immigrants in their host countries. The previous records of crimes and corruption motivated the Trump's administration in the US to extend travel bans to Nigerian immigrants to the USA. This paper offers this view sequel to the report gathered from *usatoday* (an online news magazine) as written by Monsy Alvarado and Alan Gomez (2020). In the news magazine, they write as follows:

The Trump administration announced the expansion of its controversial travel ban late last month, saying it would add immigration restrictions on citizens from Nigeria, Myanmar, Eritrea and Kyrgyzstan who want to live or work in the U.S. permanently. It also bars citizens from Sudan and Tanzania from the U.S. diversity visa program, also known as the "green-card lottery," which aims to diversify the immigrant population in the United States by selecting applicants from countries with lower rates of immigration. The federal government cited security as the reason for expanding the travel ban to those countries, saying they had deficiencies in sharing terrorist, criminal or identity information.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/02/24/new-trump-travel-ban->

could-keep-african-immigrants-out-us/4861122002/)

The above travel ban extension to Nigeria indicates that Nigerians in America and at home have set bad records which now affect the country's (Nigeria) immigration relationship with America. This observation is consistent with Dele's observation in the film. When he (Dele) asks Segun about the progress on his (Segun's) documentations in the USA, he (Segun) has no reliable information to offer. The failure of the Nigerian government to check the spate of corruption and violent crimes has affected the global image of the country. This is what the film text covertly presents through characterisation and plot.

Though diasporic nationalism is not primarily influenced by the factors of filial relations and family bond, it (diasporic nationalism) waxes stronger when family bond and filial relations are involved. This is evident in the experiences and sacrifices that Bolu makes for Segun in order for him (Segun) to have work and residency permit in America. The sacrifices made by Bolu for Segun is consistent with Sofola's (1973, p. 140) description of the essence of extended family ties. In his book, Sofola describes the extended family system as

a feeling of belonging to the family group, integration of activities of family members for the attainment of family objectives; the utilization of family resources to help needy members, rallying to the support of a member if he is in trouble; and the maintenance of continuity between the parental family and the new family units.

Bolu understands that Segun is in desperate need of documents to ensure his permanent stay in America and put all machineries in place to ensure that he is able to get the documents. Bolu has

initiated moves to ensure the continuity of the new family units in America with undiluted assistance rendered for Segun in his trying moments. In fact, one can say that Bolu renders uncommon sacrifice for Segun by volunteering his fiancée as a wife to him (Segun) in order to get work and residency permits in America.

After the Permit, What Next?

The perennial problems that Nigerian migrants to America, Europe and other countries within and outside of the African continent face is how to manage the financial with socio-economic pressures from home and the challenges of life in their host countries/continents. These migrants are often oblivious of the facts that their problems go beyond getting permits. How to manage and sustain these permits is also one of the crucial problems being faced by these migrants. The film maker is silent on this salient point because the film comes to an end when Segun receives the documents indicating that he has been permitted to work and live in America. There are more challenges to getting work and residence permits in America and among this is how to live sustainable lives to survive the tension in the country and please the family members at home. This is one of the problems that Segun faces on his second return to America. In his conversation with Bolu (his cousin), he (Segun) states that he has learnt in America that everyone is to himself/herself. What this suggests is that there is no communal living in America as against what obtains in most African countries such as Nigeria.

On the second return of Segun to America, he finds it difficult to cope with the stress of American life and coping with the family pressure of his parents who expect him to be sending money home to them to settle the debt incurred while preparing for his (Segun's) trip abroad. This is one of the problems that the diasporans face after getting their permits in the host countries. His father misrepresents what Segun faces in America and alleges that he (Segun) spends money recklessly on women and wine.

This is also one of the misrepresentations at the family circle that some migrants face in their host countries. Though one can say that Segun's return to America is better than the first encounter in the country owing to the assistance rendered by Bolu (his cousin) and Titi (Bolu's fiancée), the second visit is not without some challenges. For instance, he works in a restaurant where his boss maltreats and bullies him. In fact, this is expected as mentioned by Titi's friend that it is called "welcome to America".

It can, therefore, be said that the film maker consciously selects what he wants to appear on the screen before the audience. What the end of the film suggests is that the only problem you have in America is to get your work permit and after that the rest is history. The film, perhaps, is a chronicle of experiences that Nigerian migrants face in America without recourse to how they are surviving or they have survived after they have got their work and residency permits. This observation is consistent with Okunoye's (2002, p. 228) observation that "African society share similar problems despite the national contexts in which they appear". The validity of this view is seen in what eventually happens to Dele (Segun's friend) in the film text. As a cab driver in an inclement weather, Dele has struggled to have some money saved for the future eventuality in America and upon return to Nigeria. Unfortunately, Dele's wife (Torera) dupes him out of his (Dele's) property after Dele catches her in the act of infidelity. This incidence also points to the fact that African (Nigerian) migrants usually have the same stroke of fate as we have in the case of Segun and Dele. In fact, Dele avoids being deported because he takes the counsel of a litigator that he should allow everything to go and start afresh.

A deduction from the above experiences of Segun and Dele is that women have more power to manage the affairs of men, especially the illegal immigrants in America. This position is premised on the fact that Segun is deported because he has a quarrel with Debby (his erstwhile girlfriend) and Dele forfeits his

property to Torera to avoid being deported. This experience, among others, is also an indication of cultural shock that Nigerians face in America. To survive economically and sociologically in America, Nigerian migrants need to adjust to the cultural shock of living in America. Torera's action is questionable in the African context because marital infidelity, most especially from women, is abominable and it requires some sanctions.

Conclusion

The paper has examined and discussed series of international migration and how this has informed the concept and practice of diasporic nationalism. The discussion of diasporic nationalism is based on the data collected from Bayo Alawiye's *The Edge*. This film is one of the critical interventions of Nollywood to diasporic discourse among other themes such as corruption and democratic values that are common in Nollywood film production. The deduction from the film is that diasporic nationalists in America have series of sociological and economic challenges to contend with in their host countries. In fact, the film underlines the fact that Nigerians in the diaspora also need to contend with cultural shock and economic tensions placed on them from home. The film presents the theme of diasporic nationalism through characterization, diction and plot.

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