



Immigration Myth Debunked in Imbolo *Mbue's Behold the Dreamers*

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Abstract - The issue of immigration is a rampant phenomenon observed in most countries, especially in sub-saharan Africa. Since the dawn of time, it has been a recurring theme discussed in literature and it continues to fuel the debate with more energy in a contemporary world marked by the rise of the process of worldwide integration, often called globalization. This study deploys push and pull theory, explaining why immigrants leave their homelands and what attracts them to the U.S., justifying the growing number of immigrants in the U.S. before questioning the traditional representation of America as a place of hope and promise, where any hard worker could succeed. Finally, it promotes return immigration and highlights the benefits that return immigrants offer to their home countries.

Keywords: immigration, push, pull, home country, America.

Résumé - La question de l'immigration est un phénomène très courant et qui est observé dans la plupart des pays, en l'occurrence les pays de l'Afrique subsaharienne. Depuis la nuit des temps, le thème de l'immigration a été de façon récurrente abordé en littérature et continue d'alimenter le débat avec autant d'ardeur dans un monde contemporain marqué par l'émergence d'une intégration mondialisée. Cette étude convoque la théorie de l'attraction-répulsion et explique les raisons pour lesquelles les immigrants quittent leur pays d'origine et sont attirés par les USA. Elle justifie le nombre croissant d'immigrants aux USA avant de remettre en question la traditionnelle représentation de l'Amérique comme étant une terre d'espoir et de promesse, où chacun peut réussir par son dur labeur. Enfin, l'étude promeut l'immigration de retour en insistant sur les avantages que ce retour procure aux pays d'origine.

Mots-clés : immigration, répulsion, attraction, pays d'origine, Amérique.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is “the international movement of people to a destination country of which they are not natives or where they do not possess citizenship in order to settle or reside there, especially as permanent residents or naturalized citizens, or to take up employment as a migrant worker or temporarily as a foreign worker” (D. Ushakov, 2020: 152). Until recently, the debate over African immigrants in the United States has been considerably less researched compared to Hispanic and Asian immigrants (F. Nii-Amoo Doodoo, 1997: 527) despite its



taking on a broader scope at the international level these days. Indeed, Africans leave their countries for many reasons which include lack of access to local resources, political instability and the desire for socio-economic prosperity (M. Kirwin and J. Anderson, 2018:12). Although many African writers acknowledge these different reasons behind African immigration in their works, they address it from different perspectives. While some present the "Atlantic Ocean as the major migration route for immigrants," (M. LeMay, 2013: 81) others see it otherwise. Imbolo Mbue, for instance, chooses to spare her characters the atrocious and hellish journey of the Atlantic crossing. She empowers her immigrants to take legal route as they travel on visitor visa to the U.S. Going to the United States as an immigrant is a way of expressing one's commitment to the American Dream. This is a myth that has sustained, so far, generations of people attracted to the new continent because it is structured around the idea that anybody who goes to America and is willing to work hard will make it.

The objective of this essay is to show that immigration is not always a panacea for survival and better life, especially in a country like the U.S. where many fail to experience the ideals of full inclusion. It deploys push and pull theory to analyze the motivations of African immigrants moving to America to improve upon their living conditions. For any migration to materialize, there should be a push and pull situation. This theory is widely used in migration research and was introduced by E. Ravenstein, as reported by A. Zanabazar, N. S. Kho and S. Jigiddorj (2021: 2). For the above scholars,

push factors are those life situations in one's present homeland that generate dissatisfaction, such as poverty, unemployment, rapid population growth, political repression, low social status. In contrast, the pull factors that make migration appealing are well-being, job opportunities, political freedom, education and the welfare system of destination country.

The quote maintains that immigration is the result of a combination of reasons that force a person to leave a country of origin and reasons that attract a person to a particular destination country.

This paper is structured around three sections. In the first section, this essay discusses some of the causes which account for African immigration flow to the U.S. In the second section, it elaborates on Mbue's contemporary analysis of the issue within the context of the global financial crisis faced by the U.S. from 2007 to 2008. It also assesses both the way Mbue allows life to treat some of the immigrants and the new comers' conflicting integration process in America. The main character, through his daily attitudes in the American setting and his perception of what America has originally promised to offer him socio-economically speaking, becomes very critical of the American Dream. The debunking of it begins. In the third section, the essay analyzes the lessons learnt



in America. The immigrants' return home is sustained by a strategy of reinterpretation of the American Dream in order to apply it to the local setting.

1. Identifying the Root Causes of Immigration

Many factors –*macro*–, *meso*– and *micro*– act together to influence an individual's migration from his/her native home to a hosting country. However, this study focuses on the *macro* factors which deal with the “political, demographic, socio-economic and environmental situations” (F. Castelli, 2018:1). Over centuries, people, especially Africans, have developed a “migration culture.” While some migrate just for the sake of migrating, the taste for adventure and personal attitude to migration, others migrate to cope with the many elements affecting their socio-economic plight in the macro factor, forming a top-priority in the global policy debate as most of the populations in Africa are victims of socio-economic inequality, political instability and cultural regulations, etc.

In *Behold the Dreamers*, Mbue depicts a family, Jende and Neni Jonga, who leave their native land, Limbe, Cameroon, in search for a better life in the U.S. Throughout the novel, the reader is made to understand that the socio-economic –rampant unemployment and poverty–, political and cultural landscape prevailing in their place of origin work against their self-fulfilment. Consequently, they often develop a negative perception of Cameroon.

Considering the socio-economic aspect, Jende is unfairly treated in Cameroon. Poverty prevents him from being legally married. Although he gets a child with Neni, she “is still [his] girlfriend” (*Behold*, 23). A conversation between Jende and his white employer, Clark Edwards, a senior executive officer at Lehman Brothers, is revealing:

“I could not even marry my wife. I did –”
 “What do you mean, you couldn't marry? Poor people get married every day.”
 “Yes, they can, sir. Everyone can marry, sir. But not everyone can marry the person that they want” (*Behold*, 43).

Jende's social status and economic situation prevent him from marrying the type of person he wants to in his homeland. His being a poor man is the hindrance, as is confirmed by Winston, his cousin: “It's a class thing,” Winston said. “Jende's from a poor family” (*Behold*, 23).

Another conversation between Jende and Clark shows that Cameroon offers little opportunity to its poor people. The following standpoint makes it clearer that Jende lives below the poverty line:

“My country is no good, sir,” he said. “It is nothing like America. I stay in my country; I would have become nothing. I would have remained nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir?”



I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man."
"And that could never happen in your country?"
"Never, Mr. Edwards" (*Behold*, 39).

The picture from the foregoing quotation proves that many young people are denied a good future in Limbe, Cameroon. A status of poverty handed down from generation to generation is promoted in the country. Jende's strong point that building one's own happiness in one's homeland is nothing but pipe dream shows that many people from Limbe face "a future of poverty and despondency in their own country" (*Behold*, 19) while in the U.S., things happen in a different way.

Not only is Jende poor but his family is too. It is as if poverty were inherited and contagious in Cameroon: "He spoke of his father the farmer, his mother the trader and pig breeder, his four brothers, and their two-bedroom *caraboat* house in New Town, Limbe" (*Behold*, 21). The socio-economic cumberdom imposed by Cameroon on its people holds captive Jende's family, making life unbearable to them. A two-bedroom *caraboat* house for six people is evidence that they are confronted with dire living conditions.

In Cameroon, Jende is equally put at a disadvantage as far as employment is concerned. With no opportunity to "finish school," (*Behold*, 68) Jende has become a garbage collector (*Behold*, 255) as "any job is a good job in Cameroon..." (*Behold*, 43).

In addition, Neni, Jende's wife, is also a victim of the socio-economic situation prevailing in Cameroon. Although she "had a dream besides marriage and motherhood: to become a pharmacist" (*Behold*, 14), she has been denied the chance to further her education because her father "didn't think it was worthwhile paying for an almost-twenty-year-old to attend secondary school" (*Behold*, 311). Consequently, she is confined in the traditional gender roles, considered appropriate for her, as her poor father "unceasingly complained about his financial headaches and delivered a lecture about CFA franc not growing on mango trees whenever one of his eight children asked for money for school fees or new uniforms" (*Behold*, 14). On this score, Neni always

wake[s] up in the morning with no plans except to [sic] clean the house, go to the market, cook for her parents and siblings, take care of Liomi, meet with her friends and listen to them bash their mothers-in-law, go to bed and look forward to more of the same the next day because her life was going neither forward nor backward (*Behold*, 14).

Neni's boredom with life in Limbe is preparing her to lose interest in the Cameroonian setting. Her country offers little development prospects to her because everything works together to prevent her from making "it as far as high



school” is concerned (*Behold*, 311). Because life is monotonous in this setting, something new needs to happen. Human dignity needs to be given a new chance. Since Cameroon makes it hard for Neni’s parents to afford her school fees, she is obliged to “attend evening computer classes,” instead of a formal one (*Behold*, 311). This puts limitations on her chances to get a job in Limbe. Indeed, as the narrator puts it, after her computer classes, “she’d been unable to get a job because there were too few jobs in Limbe [...] She had been bored and frustrated at home” (*Behold*, 311).

Besides socio-economic reasons behind Africans’ immigration to the West, political imbroglios contribute a great deal to this phenomenon. Indeed, the political situation of most African countries is equally a major contributor to immigration. In *Behold the Dreamers*, the narrator highlights Jende’s victimization through the porosity of Cameroonian democracy. This makes the country a repulsive setting. For a minor crime, Jende is sent to jail by “a customs officer at the seaport in Douala” (*Behold*, 110). He spends “four months [...] in prison in Buea” (*Behold*, 244) just for having impregnated the daughter of a rich man (*Behold*, 21). If human rights were well implemented in Cameroon, this social issue could be settled amicably rather than initiating prosecution against Jende. Little wonder his powerlessness before the Cameroon political system has forced him to immigration as the narrator points out:

It was during the nights of his illness that he thought about his life, about what he would do with it once he was released. He couldn’t think of anything he wanted more than to leave Cameroon, move to a country where decent young men weren’t thrown into prison for minor crimes but were instead given opportunities to make something of their lives” (*Behold*, 245).

Jende’s decision to immigrate to the U.S. originates from the unpleasant experiences he had in Cameroon. The Cameroonian setting appears more and more hostile to the character. Consequently, when “he finally got out of prison...Jende returned to Limbe, determined to start saving money to leave the country” (*Behold*, 245).

The political situation in many African countries in general and in Cameroon in particular prompts many people to use exile as a pretext to stay in the U.S. which is processed into a haven of peace. Although some immigrants are never involved in any political persecution, many will invent “false stories of persecution,” (*Behold*, 225) based on the daily happenings in Africa, to persuade the immigration officers to help them earn green cards. In this context, Bubakar, “a fast-talking Nigerian in Flatbush, Brooklyn...an expert in the art of giving clients the best stories of persecution to gain asylum” (*Behold*, 19), is also hired by Winston to use the political situation in Cameroon and get papers for Jende, who has initially come to the U.S. on a visitor visa just for three months:



"How long do you plan on staying in New York City?" the consulate had asked him. "Only three months, sir," he had replied... (*Behold*, 18).

The above extract is taken from Jende's U.S. visa interview with the consular officer in order to determine whether or not he is eligible to receive the visa. Although he has submitted ample evidence of his wish to return home, he is internally certain he will not see Cameroon again. Once in the U.S., "asylum is the best way to get *papier* and remain in the country" permanently after his visitor visa expires (*Behold*, 19). As a result of his disappointment in the course of things in Cameroon, the character starts seeing America as an "asylum."

Using political persecution as a pretext just like many immigrants willing to seek asylum in the U.S. is equally the case with Langaman's younger brother, living in Montana. Although he has never gone "near a voting booth in *pays*, he's now saying he was a member of SDF and submitting evidence of how his friends were beaten and locked up for months and how he, too, could be if he returns to Cameroon" (*Behold*, 226). He claims that he "left *pays* because Biya was going to put him in Kondengui for challenging him" (*Behold*, 226). Another asylum made-up story is reported by Bubakar who helped the daughter of a Prime Minister from an unmentioned country in East Africa, claiming to be "afraid of her life back home" (*Behold*, 20). Bubakar's following declaration shows that many Africans use asylum pretexts, due to political insecurity, to leave their countries: "You think they're all really running away from something? Puh-leez. Let me tell you something: I just won asylum only last month for the daughter of the prime minister of some country in East Africa. We all do what we gotta do to become American, *abi*"? (*Behold*, 20). It is certain that fraud in the process of attaining immigration asylum is a huge issue as many people would lie whether to stay in the U.S. or to immigrate there. Besides economic and political reasons, the novel equally conjures up the desire of the Jongas to claim their "share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America" (*Behold*, 19) as an important pull factor prompting Africans to migrate to the U.S. The American Dream attracts everybody. For Jende, being in America will be an asset for him to rise above subsistence living, and to provide a more prosperous future for his family than he could being in Cameroon. He clearly expresses his feelings to his white employer: "Everyone wants to come to America, sir. Everyone. To be in this country, sir. To live in this country. Ah! It is the greatest thing in the world, Mr. Edwards" (*Behold*, 39). For the poor, the grass is always greener abroad than at home.

Not only is Jende attracted to the new opportunities available in the U.S. but Neni is also eager to relocate in a new country. She is constantly "daydreaming about the day she would leave Limbe and be in America" (*Behold*, 13) because she wants



more material comfort, and the kind of professional and personal autonomy that few women enjoy in Limbe.

Like the Jongas, many young people in Cameroon are seduced by the potential glamorous life abroad. They run away from Limbe which has become “a town devoid of the young and ambitious, scantily populated with those too old, too young, and too feeble to flee to distant lands for the riches that could not be gotten in Limbe” (*Behold*, 227). Many of them take “a succession of crowded buses to get from Cameroon to Lybia so they could cross into Italy on leaky boats and arrive there with dreams of a happier life if the Mediterranean didn’t swallow them alive” (*Behold*, 324). The general perception of African migration is presented here as many young people of Limbe, at the risk of their lives, move in search of opportunity and sometimes safety in western countries.

The first section of the essay has focused on the reasons why the home country becomes a hostile place to the characters. As a result of this hostility, many have started developing a poor self-esteem until the writer makes them move from this negative setting to the U.S., which appears to them as a place where the grass is greener.

2. The Host Country’s Social Environment: The Myth of an Always Successful Life Beyond the Borders

This section investigates a variety of myths surrounding the story of an always successful life for immigrants at their destination. It shows that most of them get preyed upon by “multiple challenges when making a new home in a foreign land” (Loucky, 2006: 20).

Throughout the novel, the Jonga family offers glimpses of what life looks like in America for millions of African immigrants, whose plans and aspirations end up tumbling down. *Behold the Dreamers* warns dreamers who always picture America as a place where they can have everything in life” (*Behold*, 14) because many have been indoctrinated “on all the lies... [they] have been fed about America” (*Behold*, 103). The debunking of the American Dream begins as soon as you get off the boat in America.

Mbue’s own assumptions parallel those of her characters. During a conversation with some of her anonymous interlocutors who wants to know her thought about America before emigrating there, she answers:

I got the impression that there was very little poverty in America and that it was a place where with hard work anyone could succeed... My understanding of America was also shaped by people from my town who’d emigrated to America and returned home to visit with nice clothes and shoes and an air of affluence that I attributed to the fact that they were living materially comfortable lives (*Behold*, 390).



The use of the past tenses in her answer sustains the view that Mbue is ignorant of some of the American realities before she travels there. She falls for the illusion of the perfect life and success stories of the returnees from America until she realizes that her first impressions do not match up with what she uses to imagine. She further notes: “widespread poverty exists in America, and it’s tough...One of the things I learned and saw around me is that the sense of failure at living in poverty can be very acute, especially for immigrants who purposely came here searching for a better life” (*Behold*, 390).

Likewise, many African immigrants go to America with big hopes of creating a successful life for themselves and for their children as they blindly trust the make-believe promises of equal opportunity for all without any regard to race and national origin until they come to the evidence that the realities are otherwise.

Behold the Dreamers reports the facts through the experience of the Jonga family. Before travelling to America, they always think that “America gave everyone, black or white, an equal opportunity to be whatever they wished to be...” (*Behold*, 312). However, having lived in New York City for years as immigrants, they end up realizing that many realities prove their expectations wrong.

In a sense, *Behold the Dreamers* presents a realistic view of twenty-first-century America as it grapples with the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. Based on her own experiences in America, Mbue shifts from the traditional representation of America as a place of hope, promise, and high opportunity for all to a clear representation of the realities of being a black immigrant in America.

The realities experienced by immigrants in search of new opportunities oftentimes end up overlooking their survival plans. Back in Limbe, Jende does poor qualification jobs as “farmer responsible for tilling land and growing healthy crops; street cleaner responsible for making sure the town of Limbe looked beautiful and pristine” (*Behold*, 3). However, these jobs are better than the slave jobs he has found in America: “I work as a servant to people, driving them all over, the whole day, sometimes the whole week, answering yes sir, yes madam, bowing down even to a little child” (*Behold*, 230). Further, he works as “dishwasher in Manhattan restaurant, in charge of ensuring patrons ate from clean and germ-free plates” (*Behold*, 3) and then as a “livery cabdriver in the Bronx, responsible for taking passengers safely from place to place” (*Behold*, 3). Jende comes to the U.S. only to find himself in the position of nobody. His early work experiences in America are no better than his previous occupations in Limbe.

Although, later on, America blesses Jende with another chauffeur’s job “that had changed his life and that was enabling him to take care of his family, send his



wife to school, send his father-in-law a cash gift every few months, replace the roof and crumbling wooden walls of his parents' house, and save for the future" (*Behold*, 204), his "new life had come with its share of new pains" (*Behold*, 245). Despite his progress, the situation is not bright though, at the beginning. He goes through hard times as life in America makes it impossible for him to work a decent job and afford a comfortable living. Consequently, he spends "almost two years of sharing a two-bedroom basement apartment with six Puerto Rican men in the Bronx" (*Behold*, 12). Seven persons in a two-bedroom basement apartment translates the housing challenges immigrants are confronted with in their search of a happy life in America. Even after many years spent in America and after being blessed with the best job he can afford as Clark's chauffeur, a job that pays "thirty-five thousand" dollars (*Behold*, 16), Jende still lives in a "place full of cockroaches" (*Behold*, 308) with his family and complains about it. The state of their "sunless one-bedroom apartment" (*Behold*, 27) is revealed when the sons of Clark, Vince and Mighty Edwards visit them for a little dinner:

The Edwards boys were fazed by the obvious signs of poverty in the apartment (the worn-out brown carpet; the retro TV sitting on a coffee table across from the sofa; the fan in the corner struggling to do the job of an AC; the fake flowers hanging on the wall and doing nothing to brighten the living room). Mighty ran to the bedroom with Liomi to see Liomi's toys and called out to his brother that wow, everyone gets to sleep in the same bedroom here... (*Behold*, 163).

No doubt, both the size of the apartment and the room furniture give a picture of the obvious signs of poverty in the apartment. On no account will these immigrants be able to find the kind of life for which they move to America. The debunking of the American Dream goes on.

Indeed, the financial crisis has also crippled many immigrants' self-fulfillment in the U.S. Mbue's own analysis of the effect of the economic breakdown on them is highlighted in the following quote: "In the heat of the crisis, sometimes when I heard of a company laying off X number of employees, I wondered who the employees were [...] and how that job loss would affect their lives..." (*Behold*, 391).

The financial crisis has seriously impacted the lives of many employees from different backgrounds in America as many are laid off from jobs. The most vulnerable might be the immigrants whose attempt to realize their freedom is chained by discrimination. Jende's case is worth underscoring: "But then Clark looked at him, and Jende could see it in his eyes. "I'm really sorry, Jende," he said, "but I'm going to have to let you go" (*Behold*, 251). Obviously, days after Lehman, a global financial services firm bankrupted (*Behold*, 179), Jende is laid off from his chauffeur job which enables him to make both ends meet and send his father-in-law every now and then a "nice transfer through Western Union" (*Behold*, 43).



The unemployment situation in America during the financial crisis, as reported by Mbue, parallels Richard Bulliet's stand on the issue in *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History*: "When Lehman Brothers, one of the country's foremost financial firms, declared bankruptcy in September, a recession turned into a catastrophic economic downturn [...] unemployment climbed as employers laid off workers they could no longer afford" (Bulliet, 2009: 908).

In short, given the financial crisis with the economic situation looking pretty grim, Jende and many other immigrants experience joblessness. Because there was no job for people, many were begging for whatever job they could find (Perkins, 1983: 256). The following reports a conversation between Jende and Mr. Jones, the owner of the cab which Jende drove in the Bronx before earning the job with Clarks:

Mr. Jones, the owner of the livery cabs, had no shifts for him. "People are lining up around the block to drive a cab," he said. "Too many people. Don't even got enough cars to rent to everyone."
"Not even graveyard shift?" Jende asked. "I'll take anything."
"I only got five cars. Five cars and fourteen people who wanna drive them."
Jende tried to coax him into taking shifts from other drivers to give to him...
"Sorry, bro. Ain't no more shifts. Nothing for the next two months (*Behold*, 256).

The economic crisis due to capitalism has cost many people their jobs and life savings. Albeit they have come to America to fulfill themselves through more or less decent jobs, immigrants are now ready to line up "around the block to drive a cab" or to "take anything" available. Jende himself is ready to coax Mr. Jones to "get his old job back" (*Behold*, 255).

With the changes reported on how the economic recession of 2007-2008 has impacted the country and its economy, job opportunities in the U.S. declined as the labor market remained generally tight. By the force of circumstances, things seem as if the unskilled are competing among themselves.

After a period of unemployment, Jende has finally, in order to make ends meet, secured some odd jobs. To maintain himself and his family, he is obliged to work two low-paid jobs:

The next week, after a series of long restless nights, he got a job washing dishes at two restaurants. One restaurant he used to work for, when he first came to New York, back before he got a driver's license and started driving a cab. On his first day back a colleague told him about an opening at another restaurant in Hell's Kitchen. He took the subway there right after his shift and got that job, too. With the two jobs, he worked mornings, afternoons, evenings. He worked weekends, too (*Behold*, 257).

Jende does not miss any opportunity to take on any job available to him. Because "it's a long, hard journey from struggling immigrant to successful American" (*Behold*, 322), Jende contents himself with working overtime and survives even if he thinks that it is "a lot of work for one person in one day" (*Behold*, 29).



Immigrants risk remaining unemployed, and this increases their determination to work different odd jobs for their survival. Like Jende, many other immigrants are relentlessly working two jobs with different days and time. The example of Betty, a close friend of Neni, is a case in point:

Thirty-one years in this country and Betty was still trying [...] Betty had come here as a child with her parents and gotten her papers through them. She had been a citizen for over a decade, and yet here she was, in her early forties, working two jobs as a certified nursing assistant at nursing homes, stuck in nursing school (*Behold*, 315).

Working two jobs seems obvious for many immigrants. Getting immigration documents and being “a citizen for over a decade” do not prevent Betty from working two jobs at a “Lower East Side nursing home” (*Behold*, 314) in order to face the hardships of life. The price to pay to make it in America at time is too high.

Analyzing immigrants’ lives in the U.S., one can get to the conclusion that many of them are out of place in the U.S. as they are denied full integration rights. A conversation between Bubakar and Jende corroborates this idea: “Some of them are wicked people, very wicked. Some people in this country don’t want people like me and you there” (*Behold*, 57). Their vain struggle to “blend into a world one was never meant to be a part of” (*Behold*, 95) justifies their being trapped in “so many pointless pressures” (*Behold*, 103).

The plight of Fatou, Neni’s close friend, is also alluded to. Although she has been in the U.S. for more than two decades, she has never succeeded in integrating the socio-economic life of America. Her confession to Neni reveals such a powerlessness: “When you in America vingt-quatre ans, and you still poor, you no gonno count no more” (*Behold*, 11). She proceeds further and admits: “You’re ashamed to tell people you have been here for twenty-four years...” (*Behold*, 11). Indeed, Fatou is offered nothing better than “braiding hair for a living” in America (*Behold*, 357). Her inability to make headway in America embarrasses her to tell people how long she has been in the country of all hopes. The American Dream is a founding myth that seems to promise success for all but only in theory.

Immigrants are also victims of prejudice and have anti-immigrant sentiment. Jende clearly alludes to that when he tries to comfort Mighty, who is crying on the way to school because his parents had a fight the previous night.

“Oh, Mighty,” Jende said, pulling the child to his just. He thought for a moment that someone might see him and call the police—a black man with a white boy against his chest, inside a luxury car, on the side of a street on the Upper East Side...” (*Behold*, 221).



The racist and hostile social atmosphere of the host country makes Jende anticipate the anti-immigrant feelings that motivate some white Americans. He is conscious that he is “just a black man” (*Behold*, 200) in a white world and consequently has to be careful and cautious.

The U.S. immigration system is equally fraught with prejudices. The anti-immigrant sentiment often compels many immigration officers to “take measures to assure the immediate departure from the country of the said foreigners” (Sawyer, 1950: 24). Bubakar’s declaration to Jende is in line with the above assertion: “Until the day you become American citizen, Immigration will always be right on your ass, every single day, following you everywhere [...] if they decide they hate the way your fart smells” (*Behold*, 74).

The police is another institution used to foster any anti-immigrant attitude toward African immigrants in particular. Bubakar rightly criticizes the police as he points out the flaws related to their being established to uphold and protect white supremacy only to the detriment of black immigrants: “The police is for the protection of white people, my brother...Never black men. Black men and police are palm oil and water” (*Behold*, 74). Palm oil is known to threaten water’s quality. This metaphor introduced in the plot of the novel to symbolize Blacks and the police makes it clear that most African immigrants are out of place in the U.S. and as a result, they cannot “afford to live the way [they]’d like to live” (*Behold*, 322).

Considering the above insight into the poor quality treatment immigrants are offered in the U.S., it is not hard to fathom how many of these immigrants are blatantly thwarted in their ambitions. Both Jende and Neni are inevitably affected by the way America shapes their personal identity and future. Mothers who are the source and object of all love have “turned into a fury” (Stone, 1982: 127). A case in point concerns Neni. For nothing at all, she proclaims indignation when her son Liomi simply reminds her of a parent-teacher reunion held by his school:

“Mama,” Liomi said to her one morning as she packed his lunch, “please don’t forget we have the parent-teacher conference today.”
Tell your teacher I cannot come... (*Behold*, 63).

The curtness and the outright refusal given by Neni to Liomi in regard to the invitation to the school meeting dictates her being completely lost and crippled by the misfortune related to her status of immigrant. She does not belong in America anymore.

Jende, whom life in the U.S. has forced to work many unskilled jobs, equally yells on Liomi and Neni out of frustration. The following episode illustrates the fact: “He scolded his mother for asking for money to patch the kitchen wall and barked at Liomi when the child asked if his father could take him to an arcade” (*Behold*, 235). Jende’s curt retort to his son and his attitude toward his wife



translates his inability to fit in the American society. Jende “who seldom uttered words like “stupid” and “idiot” was now throwing those words left and right, in moments of rage and frustration, directing them at [...] his son, and, most of all, his wife” (*Behold*, 235). The American Dream makes many promises it cannot deliver.

Besides yelling at Liomi and scolding Neni, Jende is turned to a “man permanently at the edge of his breaking point” (*Behold*, 235), a “grotesque being created by the sufferings of an American immigrant life” (*Behold*, 237) of whom Neni is afraid because she is almost certain that Jende “who had promised to always take care of her” would beat her (*Behold*, 237).

Theoretically, America is a place where anybody who works hard can succeed. But the truth of the matter is that not anybody can make it there. By all accounts and on the basis of the experiences immigrants go through in their host country, many have led them to go back to their home countries for a new beginning. But they do learn lessons from the myth of the American Dream they can implement at home.

3. Homecoming: Immigrant-Home Interactions

Different motivations shape the immigrants’ return home. Some return home because they are able to accumulate a certain amount of savings in the host country. Others, contrary to their expectation of new opportunities and happiness in the new land, realize their unhappiness and decide to go back home. Based on the novel under study, this part of the essay focuses on the second category.

Given the many challenges immigrants face in the U.S., Mbue deploys return home strategies as the ultimate remedy, because the host country fails them. Thus, when it comes to the Jongas and other immigrants, there comes a moment of epiphany in the shape of the idea of journeying back home. They quickly grab it and plan for it. Without any delay, the Jongas board “an Air Maroc flight from JFK to Douala via Casablanca” to live a better life than the one they had lived in Cameroon before immigrating to America (*Behold*, 379). The moment of epiphany motivates Jende to start looking at the U.S. in a different light: “I don’t want to stay in this country anymore” (*Behold*, 305). He next complains: “I don’t like what life has become in this country [...] The suffering in Limbe was bad, but this one here, right now...it’s more than I can take” (*Behold*, 306). Through fresh eyes, Jende starts looking back at Limbe as a place he can get fulfilled.

Returnee immigrants actually do not go back home unaffected; they often benefit from their stay abroad: “return migrants are widely recognized as important agents of change, inducing modernization processes of their home countries” King (in Nicola Daniele Coniglio & Jan Brzozowski, 2016: 85).



Mbue, in *Behold the Dreamers*, enables Jende and his family to return home and live a better life. Jende returns home with “close to ten million CFA francs, enough to restart their life in a beautiful rental with a garage for his car and maid so his wife could feel like a queen. He would have enough to start a business, which would enable him to someday build a spacious brick house” (*Behold*, 352). Jende makes an allusion to his prospective life back home in these terms: “I am happy that I can now go home and live a better life than the life I lived before I came to America” (*Behold*, 370). That better life implies that Jende will no longer live in one-bed apartment or as “a poor boy from a caraboa house in New Town but a man who had returned from America with a lot of dollars” (*Behold*, 349). He is “gonno leave small one-room and go stay for mansion” (*Behold*, 357).

With complete confidence, Jende offers a promising life to his two children. The new life conjures up a better life awaiting them upon return home: “Liomi and Timba would have many things they would not have had in America...” (*Behold*, 361) while a relative total bliss will be the share of Neni: “I promise you with all my heart and soul, *bébé*,” he had said to her. “You will live like a queen in Limbe” (*Behold*, 350). The benefits that returning home guarantees to immigrants are obvious in the above illustrations.

Not only did Jende enjoy a good life back home but he also was presented as a job-creator and development promoter for his country. Upon “his return to Limbe, he (would start) his own business: Jonga Enterprises. His slogan would be “Jonga Enterprises: Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe” (*Behold*, 353). Little doubt, return immigrants offer many opportunities to their home countries in terms of entrepreneurship, job creation, human and financial capital accumulation but they need to be realistic in their prospective ambitions.

Jende's entreprize will surely generate job opportunities to the youth in Limbe: “He called his brother Moto the next day and asked him to begin the search for men to till the land in Bimbia and plant plantains, *egusi*, and yams” (*Behold*, 356). Jende will be a businessman who will break into Limbe market and boost the labor market in Cameroon. He will sell “food in Limbe market and ship some of it abroad” (*Behold*, 353). He has developed a new perspective. He has matured as America has taught him that development needs creative thinking before money is needed. To implement the new ideas, he calls upon his brother for assistance.

That return home from immigration contributes to the development of the home countries is corroborated through the experiences of Victor, the childhood friend with whom Jende used to play football again:

“Emmanu told me a club in West End even sells Cristal glass by glass.”
“You're serious?”
“...I'm serious. Victor owns the club...” “Emmanu swears the club is *helele*.”
“How did he come up with the capital?”



“You didn’t hear the story? The boy went to Bulgaria. Bulgaria or Russia or Australia – somewhere over there. Boy comes back with some serious *kolo*” (*Behold*, 354-5).

Although return immigration does not automatically translate into the development of the home countries, a strong evidence from Victor’s achievement posits returnees as important agents of change. The host country – whether Bulgaria or Russia or Australia – provides him with the capital of his business. He is going to participate in the improvement of the economic climate of his family and, by and large, of his country.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed different reasons justifying people’s moving away from their home to a new home. Through the experiences of the Jendes, within the context of the 2007-2008 financial crisis in America, the study has debunked the assumption that the host countries always guarantee a successful life to immigrants through ample evidence of unemployment, racism, segregation and indecent living conditions. Based on the immigrants’ failure to integrate the socio-economic fabric in their host country’s socio-economic environment, the study has finally promoted a return home by emphasizing the benefits for both the countries of origin and the returnees themselves.

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