

**MIGRATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF IDENTITY: A NEW HISTORICIST  
READING OF DUL JOHNSON'S DEEPER INTO THE NIGHT**

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***Abstract***

*This study discusses Dul Johnson's Deeper into the Night, looking at issues of migration and identity within the Nigerian sphere. A lot of people tend to associate the term migration and identity to go hand in hand. It is not out of place to think that way. This is because when people migrate to a different place, they carry their identity along with them. Hence, by the time they settle in a new environment, they are faced with the issue of assimilation and as a matter of fact, their cultural identity tends to shift. Through the novel, the issues of migration and the challenges of identity is presented through the male character Alhaji Nisa Maiguguwa who migrated from Karara emirate with his entire family in search of a better life. The author presents conflicting issues such as ethnicity, religion and tradition which also introduces the problems of identity in the text under study. This research focuses on the reasons for migration and the problems faced by characters as it concerns identity. New Historicism is used in analyzing the text.*

***Keywords:*** Migration, Culture, Identity Crisis, Ethnicity, Religion.

**DOI:** 10.58934/jgss.v4i16.220

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Dul Johnson's *Deeper into the Night* is a linguistically innovative novel that is infused with humour, satire and also stylized linguistic expressions. A lot of reviews on the text focus on power play or power dynamics, although that forms the major issues in the text. As true as that is, the text draws our attention to post-modernist themantic concerns such as identity crisis, migration, ethnicity and religion. The foregoing shows that our society is bedevilled with such

concerns. Over the years, literary works like Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* raised the issues of migration and the challenges of identity. The concept of migration is not entirely new; in pre-colonial days people moved from one location to another in search for a better life, which is still the trend today. Although there are different reasons why people migrate; for some it is voluntary for others it is involuntary which could be as a result of war, natural disaster and the likes. An instance is the Russia-Ukraine war which has displaced people from their countries to neighbouring countries. In Nigeria, people have equally been displaced from their communities as a result of endless ethnic, religious rivalry between communities and even the flooding in Kogi State where houses are completely submerged, forcing the occupants to seek a better life elsewhere. Another phase of migration that is ravaging like wild fire is the current trend of relocating outside the shores of Nigeria, all in a quest for a better life.

The concept of migration goes hand in hand with identity, although identity is a highly controversial discourse in post-colonial communities. The complex nature of the concept is not totally clear or fixed. Mercer argues that "identity becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by experience of doubt and uncertainty." (43). Post-colonial writers constantly draw our attention to the impact of colonialism on former colonies. Dul's *Deeper into the Night* explores not only the issues of migration but also raises the question of identity crisis as it has continued to eat deeply into our society, thereby rendering post-colonial societies almost helpless.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

New Historicism will be used in analyzing the text. This theory is used because *A Deeper into the night* is largely informed by history. Thus this approach will be relevant to the study.

New Historicism is a critical approach that came up in the 1980s in reaction to the text only approach of the formalist new criticism of the 1970s. According to Bonnie Klomp and Larry Stewart in *A Guide to Literary Criticism and Research*, the main proponents of this approach include Michael Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose amongst others.

Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray in *The Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms* purport that: New Historicist critics assume that works of literature both influence and are influenced by historical reality and they share a belief in referentiality, that is, a belief that literature both refers to and is referred to by things outside itself. New historicists have also asserted that literature is not distinct from history

that is relevant to it. They remind us that it is difficult to reconstruct the past as it really was. This is because authors are seen as subjects that are manufactured by culture and in turn transcribe cultural codes and discourses into literary texts. However, the New Historicist believes that no individual can rightfully construct history even as every individual is controlled by codes and are almost blinded to their existence. The point is if an individual acts like a subject to culture, text and ideology just like a subject acts in a sentence, then it limits an individual from effectively understanding history because they cannot see that history they seek to reconstruct. We understand that while literature refers to and is influenced by history; history also refers to and is influenced by literature. To Murfin and Rose, New Historicists recognize the importance of elements within a work of art but these elements are analyzed from a historical perspective. This means that in analyzing a literary work, we have to take into consideration the history of the society from which the text emanates. It is in this light that Taine in his book *History of Literature* held that all art is an expression of the environment and time in which the artist lived. In simple terms, New Historicists believe that the analysis of literary text often refers to things outside the text like the author's biography, socio-economic, political and cultural realities of a given society.

Furthermore, Louis Montrose in *Professing the Renaissance* states that New Historicism illustrates the historicity of a text and the textuality of history (Murfin and Rose, 243). From the above, we realize that literary texts are influenced by history. In this light, the novel under study illustrates this view by showing how the author presents historical facts in his work. Although New Historicism has many tenets, the present study will be limited to the historical relevance to text, that is, historicity and textuality.

According to Anton Kaes in a guide to Literary Criticism and Research, New Historicism is "A critical method that perceives the literary text as a communal product rather than the author's intention" (53). This shows that literary work reflects the socio-cultural milieu from which the text emanates. According to Kaes, the interpretation given to a literary work does not consider only the author but also the cultural context that has produced the text. *Deeper into the night* will be analyzed in relation to the socio-political, and cultural realities of the respective society.

New Historicists believe that literature reflects the history (cultural, political and religious) aspects of the society from which it was written. For a better understanding of the work, it is important to consider the historical background, circumstances or ideology which the work presents because the life of an author or the ideology of a particular period can greatly influence the way a text is perceived.

John Peck and Martin Coyle, in *Literary Terms and Criticism* posit that: The boundaries between history and literature have become fluid and open, so that for the historian, text increasingly represents a major source of information about the realities of a period. Peck, Coyle seem to agree with Michael Foucault that history is not made up of a single cause or event; rather they see history as linked to different events.

These critics further argue that there is no clear distinction between literature and history since historians believe that text represents a major source of information about the realities of a particular period. Peck, Coyle and Foucault agree with Stephen Greenblatt who holds that literature cannot be separated from history. Thus, literature and history are interwoven as a writer cannot be indifferent to the past. Hence, New Historicism is relevant to the analysis of this research work because the events that characterized the novel is a historical fact.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study is text based as it analyzes Dul Johnson's *Deeper into The Night* with the aim of exploring thematic concerns on migration and the challenges of identity. The study depends on critical works, journal articles, book reviews and online materials.

### **3. SYNOPSIS**

*Deeper into the night* is centered on a community in Tarok land in Langtang local government of Plateau state. Though a fiction, the novel tells a true life event. Gwangtim and a neighbouring village, taktim came under attack due to the migration of the Hausas represented by Alhaji Nisa Maiguguwa who migrated from Karara emirate for religious and business reasons. While old Gwangtim the founder of Gwangtim community was yet alive, he was a custodian of their tradition and was saddled with the responsibility of presiding over the affairs of the community. Old Gwangtim was advanced in age and there was need for a successor. Butko his first son who is seen as fit to wear the crown dies mysteriously. The sudden death of Butko led to the death of old Gwangtim. After his death, Nimfa the second son took over the leadership position forcefully. His leadership took a different phase as he fell into the hands of Emir of Karara, Alhaji Danmatsi whose form of leadership he admired.

This act by Nimfa brought a lot of changes in the community as he accepted what his father rejected. His alliance with the emir births the crisis which starter from Jos, the capital of Plateau

state, and extends to Gwangtim and then Taktim community with his son Mamzhi as the controversial hero is the crisis.

#### **4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

##### **1. The Process of Migration**

Migration is presently a household word in our society as people constantly seek a better means of survival or livelihood for themselves. Interestingly, when the term 'migration' is mentioned, people are in a hurry to think of one relocating outside the shores of Nigeria. According to history, people started migrating before the coming of the colonial masters. Johnson's *Deeper into the Night* takes us back to historical realities on how people migrated from one locality to another just to secure a better life for themselves. Tyem Zhimak and his family were the first to arrive Taktim. They migrated from the Tarok hills of Zini. Their major source of attraction was simply the quest for a farmland since they didn't have enough farmlands on the hills. Tyem's first farming season yielded a very tremendous harvest which attracted about ten new families to Taktim. According to new Historicism, it is important to analyse a literary work from a historical perspective. It is in this light that Taine in his book 'the history of literature' states that, art is an expression of the environment and the time in which the author lived. A close look at the history of how most Nigerian villages or communities were created is actually not far from what is reflected in the text. In the past a lot of communities relocated to places that will give them positive returns since farming was the major source of survival. This explains why Tyem was so concerned about his son owning a farmland..."You know, it is time you got your own portion no matter how small" (29)

The author's biography also shows that the major occupation during that period was farming as the people had to farm to sponsor their children through school). Hence, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Agriculture was the major reason for migration, and also a uniting force. The foregoing shows how the author presents it saying: "...the end of the first farming season had attracted ten new families from the Tarok Hills of Zini, and a few Kwall from the neighbouring lowlands. Now there were Goenai, Berom, Ngas, Mwaghavul, Hausa, Tiv, Buji and Miango in smaller numbers and of course the seasonal nomadic Fulani settlers scattered in the surrounding bushes" (80)

The New Historicists believe that history plays a vital role in influencing the work of art. The above quote clearly depicts the historical formation of our local communities. Taktim

continued to grow; as at the end of the second year the population had grown to a reasonable size and was gradually becoming a threat to their farms especially because they practiced shifting cultivation. Tyem Zhimak became the chief of Taktim being the first occupant of the land.

Another reason for migration as reflected in the text is business opportunities. This process began when Iliya the son of Tyem found a precious stone on his father's farm. The text is set in Plateau State, which is largely known for precious stones or solid minerals which have attracted a lot of miners into the state. The setting however justifies what the New Historicists say about art as an expression of the environment and time in which the artist lived. According to history, most indigenes were not really concerned about the precious stones since they had little knowledge about the worth of the precious stones...and they saw farming as their sole occupation. Tyem's reaction to his son explains all:

“father, see what I brought from the farm, he said, stretching his hand out. Tyem Zhimak looked at his face instead of the hand. You went to the farm today, Chirmam. Big surprise, Iliya's spirit dropped as the excitement faded off his face.” (29)

The above quote clearly shows that the indigenes showed no interest in anything precious stones. Ironically, outsiders saw mining as the major source of income which also was a major reason for migration. Tyem finally allows the stone to the market. This singular act draws attention to the Taktim community. A Hausa trader buys the stone from Dakyes in Shendam and also follows up to find out if they had few others in that location. Hence, the discovery of these precious stones further increased the population of Taktim. Tyem had predicted trouble with the issue of limited farmland without knowing that the precious stone his son found was going to be the major conflict he would face as a leader.

In a quest to expand his business entity, Alhaji Maiguguwa Nisa, the character who bought the precious stone from Dakyes; Johnson describes him as “a man destined to change the history of Taktim” (30). Nisa migrates from Karara emirate, he brings along his entire family – wives, properties, animals and children. To the people of Taktim, Nisa's mode of migration was very suspicious, although the character claimed to have come simply because he was sent by the emir of Karara as a representative on the guise of a religious head. Nisa's character is a symbolic representation of how the colonial masters came simply as missionaries, unknowing to us that they had a special mission to colonize us completely. The author presents us with a

migrant who is so focused and determined. His first interaction with the chief explains his personality.

“you are welcome, Tyem said again, our people say that a stranger is the morning dew; it’s only for a while and goes with the rising sun’  
Indeed, said the stranger. Only that I’ll be the pond and not the dew”(31)

## **2. The Challenges of Identity in the Host Communities**

New Historicism believes that a text can never be understood outside its historical context. This is true because the author is seen as a subject to his historical background. As such, the text is also seen as a reflection of the history of a particular period. In other words, the text equally makes history. The foregoing suggests that the theme associated with identity began with the history of migration.

A close look at the history of these people will explain the fact that before the coming of migrants, people were living peacefully although they had different religious beliefs, they never had to struggle or neither were they forced to identify with each other. They all lived peacefully without issues. The problems started as a result of the coming of migrants who had their own mission.

The author makes use of Alhaji Nisa character to represent the conflicts that gave rise to the problems of identity. Nisa migrated from Karara emirate under the guise of religion. Before his arrival, Taktim had Muslims, Christians and traditionalists and they all had a common ground. The expectation is that Nisa was simply going to abide by the rules by identifying with the host community as well as abiding by the existing rules. Nisa had his agenda mapped out and was in a hurry to carry it out.

The first issue that led to the whole conflict was the way Nisa came and was particularly interested in sectionalizing the religious/traditional institution; he brought a divide. He presented his god as different from others. No wonder he collected the mosque from Gutus whom he particularly disqualified. Since the character was not concerned about the interest of the host community, he also turned their farm lands into mounds of red soil as a result of mining activities. Tyem is also worried about the effect of the community, he states thus:

“Tyem Zhimak began to worry about Taktim but more especially about their farms. Within two to three years, farm lands had become mounds of red soil and

stones – graves that buried no corpses except memories of good harvests in years past”(46)

The above quote clearly portrays the clash of interests between Tyem and Nisa. Tyem is particularly concerned about the effect of mining activities on their farm lands. He is worried because in the nearest future there will be no fertile land to farm on, which would consequently lead to famine or the need to migrate to another location which would not totally be easy as it was in the past. On the other hand, Alhaji Nisa is so concerned about acquiring more lands and expands his business entity.

Nisa’s arrival to Taktim has brought serious challenges on the issue of identity. He has chosen to identify with his business instead of the host community. He is so power-driven and has forgotten that he is an immigrant. Nisa’s character is what the New Historicists call the power elites who seek to control people unjustly because of their position in the society. Hence, Nisa’s coming brings about a divide in the belief system already being practiced before his arrival. He presents his god as totally different from that of the traditionalist, this is exposed when Tyem engages Nisa in a heated argument saying “mallam Zhimak what do you mean by a message for my God? Do I have a different God from...? He realized his mistake, it was his own argument that Zhimak was going back to him” (56). Interestingly, during pre-colonial days there was no conflict as touching religion. There was just one belief system which was solely the identity of the African man which made us distinct from any race. Thus, the coming of the colonial masters has left us with the constant conflict of which religious body to identify with, which has resulted to different forms of identity crises in post-colonial era.

Furthermore, the author’s use of the omniscient narrative technique furnishes the reader with certain information on the characters. For instance, Ali’s character is quite complex as he is trapped in the quest for identity. He is faced with the dilemma of identifying with his father or relating with his father’s enemies. As difficult as that might sound, fate chooses the path for Ali to follow. Ali’s relationship with Tyem’s son, Iliya explains how communal lifestyle should be as an individual’s identity should not pose any negative threat on another person.

Furthermore, the sudden migration from Taktim to Gwangtim as a result of the crisis further intensifies the issue of identity crisis between Ali and Mamzhi. Iliya describes Nisa’s character saying; “they are worlds apart, he and his son, Iliya spoke low in a sober voice. Ali eats and drinks with me, with everybody in Taktim. Nisa would not, except with his brothers. Ali would come to our house for Christmas and invite me to eat Sallah meat or bring it to the house. Nisa



frowned at that. My father called Ali his son but Alhaji never referred to me as his son even once!” (174)

The above quote clearly describes the impact of colonization on the Africans. Instead of having common grounds and moving our nation forward, we are struggling to identify and protect the so-called superior religions thereby pushing to background the traditional belief system that has held us together before the coming of the white man. Hence, our predicament as a nation is tied to this issue of identifying with a religious body. Our political system is completely shattered because of this unending rivalry between religious bodies, and as such, we continue to mortgage the future of our children by giving the western world another opportunity to colonize us again.

Mamzhi saw Ali and Iliya as his brothers. He shared his room and his ideas with both parties not minding what belief system they identified with. All of these continued only for a short while as Mamzhi could not control his love for power, coupled with his new celebrated heroic status of being the saviour of the people of Gwantim. Mamzhi suddenly grew cold towards Ali after Iliya's betrayal of Mamzhi which led to his death. The death of Iliya threw Ali back into his shell, as he decided to remain with his father's brothers (the Muslims). Ali saw his faith as the only shield since he had no family to fall back to. His decision leads to Mamzhi's suspicion. In a quest to protect his life, he loses it despite the community's efforts.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the text takes us back to history; using New Historicism, the theory traces the challenges faced by former colonies through history thereby informing us of the impact of colonialism on our society by reemphasising the root cause of our societal challenges as it concerns identity. This study shows that as a country we will continue to suffer setbacks as long as we continue to see and treat one another differently.

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