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# TWO IDENTITY CARDS: MIGRATION DELIMAS IN CHAÎNE BY GUINEAN SAÏDOU BOKOUM AND OTHER WEST AFRICAN FRANCOPHONE NOVELS

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**Two Identity Cards: Migration Dilemmas in *Chaîne* by Guinean Saïdou Bokoum and Other West African Francophone Novels**

**Synopsis:**

To leave ones native soil in search of a better life abroad: this is the hope of many immigrants who travel to foreign lands. Many West African citizens searching for a new identity and a better standard of living abroad, soon become disillusioned. Once in the new country, many are burdened with underemployment or unemployment as well as resentment and racism. This paper will analyze these migration dilemmas in several West African Francophone novels.

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Life in France! How glorious, how magnificent! To leave the native land of Africa with its unemployment, drought, and a desolate future, in search of a better identity abroad, thus is the hope of many immigrants who travel to foreign lands. In his work "Emigration Dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa," Aderanti Adepaju explains that:

West African countries share several common features: small populations (except Nigeria), high rates population growth, large-scale migration (both within and across national frontiers), low per capita income and deteriorating economic performances. The countries are also economically fragile and politically unstable; the majority are ruled by the military and the democratization process has been rough and wrought with manipulations. (345)

P. K. Makinwa-Adebusoye in his, "Emigration Dynamics in West Africa" adds:

West African countries share several features: high annual population growth rates, low per capita incomes and, in recent years, negative or viable resource bases and are prone to droughts. Their economies are weak, with limited cross-border trade. . . . The poor economic situation coupled with rapid population growth, weak industrial infrastructure, desertification, declining agricultural productivity and crushing foreign debt signal a crisis which could be translated into substantial emigration. (435-436)

But alas!! Many West African citizens searching for a new identity and a better standard of living abroad foster an optimistic view of the host country. However, they soon become disillusioned. Once in the new country, many are burdened with underemployment or unemployment as well as resentment and racism. Boredom, distress, solitude, anguish, and being uprooted from their cultural ties permeate their existence. These migration dilemmas are mirrored in several West African Francophone novels.

This study will briefly discuss various novels and short stories of the region which focus on migrant workers living in France. This study will analyze in detail the novel *Chaîne* "Chain" penned by Guinean Saïdou Bokoum. *Chaîne* is his only novel and not much has been published about it. It is one of the rare West African Francophone novels which delves in detail about the plight of the migrant worker living in France. It relates the story of Kanaan Niane who suffers exploitation and abuse as a result of his hope to find work in France.

This view point is also portrayed in several West African Francophone novels and short stories. Such is the case in "La Noire de..." 'Black Girl' and "Lettres de France" 'Letters from France' by Ousmane Sembène, *L'Enfant noir* "The African Child" and *Dramouss* by Camara Laye, Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* "A Black Man in Paris," Ousmane Socé's *Mirage de Paris* "Mirage of Paris," Cheick Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure Ambiguë* "Ambiguous Adventure," and Ake Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* "Kocoumbou, the black student." Their rosy lenses of living in Europe soon become replaced with a stark reality after having lived on foreign soil.

In *Mirages de Paris* and in "La Noire de...", both protagonists, Fara and Diouana, initially go to France in search of an ideal life. Fara views Paris as "un Eldorado, Paris, ses beaux monuments, ses spectacles féériques, son élégance, sa vie puissante. . . ." 'an Eldorado, Paris, its beautiful monuments, its holiday celebrations, its elegance, its powerful life' (15).<sup>1</sup> However, both Diouana and Fara commit suicide. Diouana does so,

in part, to flee cultural isolation and alienation. However Fara's self-denial and belief in white superiority lead to his downfall.

Nafi, in "Lettres de France," is basically sold off in marriage to a 72 year-old man. She thought she was going to improve her life in France but her existence becomes the walls of a small apartment in Marseille.

Similarly, the hero in *Chaîne*, Kanaan Niane, journeyed to France to attend the university in Nanterre. He had planned to receive an education in France, then, return to Africa to work. However, once in school, both his parents die and he feels as though he has no more ties to the African continent. He states, "Je ne ressens aucun lien affectif qui me lie à ce qu'on appelle l'humanité" 'Nothing here links me to what one would refer to as Humanity' (49). Realism and pessimism overtake his previous optimistic view of living in France.

He is beset with the same *ennui* or "boredom" as the aforementioned protagonists. Kanaan Niane journeys through three distinct stages in the novel.<sup>2</sup> In the first section of the text, he suffers an existential crisis. In the second section, he experiences a redemptive catharsis. In the third section, he becomes a whole person through his work in the labor unions. He contributes to society by helping his fellow man.

At the beginning of the novel, Kanaan, suffers an existential crisis. *Chaîne* is the West African parallel to Sartre's *La Nausée* "Nausea" and Camus' *L'Etranger* "The Stranger." He suffers loneliness, hopelessness, and boredom after the break-up with his white French girlfriend and the loss of his parents. He roams the streets at night and sleeps during the day. He begins living a sorted and perverted lifestyle. Finally, he is beaten up by four white young adults who are in essence warning him to stay out of their neighborhood. He feels trapped in the *néant* "nothingness." He asserts, "J'avais des tas d'idées en venant ici, en Occident. Des projets comme on dit. Et puis, et puis, petit à petit, par petits accidents, je suis redevenu ce que je suis: une misère, Rien qu'une misère" 'I had a lot of ideas about coming here to the West. Some things to accomplish,

as one says. And then, and then, little by little, I became what I am today: a miserable person—nothing but a miserable person’ (83). He is utterly hopeless and contemplates ending his life. He bemoans, "J'ai échoué en tout. A présent, il faut que j'aille jusqu'au bout: échouer définitivement" ‘I have failed at everything. Now I must go the end—fail definitively’ (83).

The second stage of the novel begins when Kanaan experiences a redemptive catharsis. He undergoes this personal change when he offers to help others. Just as he was about to commit his final act, he observes a burning building. He remarks on how poorly the building was constructed. He also notices that it is a dormitory for Blacks--part of an immigrant village. By the time he arrives on the scene, several people had already died. He comments on the fact that after the fire, the Blacks will be homeless but the landlords will profit by receiving insurance money. Furthermore, the neighborhood will be glad that the immigrants are gone.

He notices that someone is still inside the building. As he assists in the rescue mission, he comments on the inhumane conditions in which the tenants are living. Kanaan helps to save twins, Kouyaté and Kam, who, in turn, pull him out of the burning building. His helping to save others, helps to save himself. He now has friends, is no longer living an individualistic “European” lifestyle, and is living amongst a group of African countrymen and women. He has found, once again, reasons to continue his life.

Kanaan now begins working with the labor unions and forms a theatre troupe which is a voice for the labor union. The theatre group portrays the history of Blacks who have been taken by both ends of a chain (122). Hence, the reason for the title of the novel, *Chaîne*. Blacks who have suffered in Europe and Africa. Blacks who suffer the plight of the migrant worker.

Thus begins the third stage of the novel--the plight of the migrant worker. These workers face poor housing or no housing at all. Racism is rampant. The working

conditions are very deplorable. Many in the novel are illegal aliens without proper identification to obtain legal recourse.

It must be noted that immigration issues are a very hot topic and a sensitive issue in many Western countries. P. K. Makinwa-Adebusoye in his chapter, "Emigration Dynamics in West Africa," asserts that "West Africa is an important migration system within which many people move, legally and illegally, from poorer areas to relatively affluent immigration countries. There is also considerable migration between West Africa and the industrialized countries of Europe and North America" (435). For instance, "In 1991, an estimated 3,761,640 Malians were residing abroad" (352). Makinwa-Adebusoye also states that the:

Economic crisis in receiving countries has meant that Malians now find it difficult to secure jobs as labour migrants. Malians in France have also become targets of racism, segregation and arbitrary changes in their conditions of employment. The negative perception of Malians held in receiving societies (as the source of high unemployment rates, insecurity, and even of political and social unrest) has translated into extreme actions against them, including expulsion. (352-353)

He also mentions that "[a]s the unemployment situation in France worsened and xenophobic reactions increased, immigration authorities became more vigilant in locating and deporting undocumented or clandestine immigrants" (354).

The novel echoes many of the problems immigrants face in France. The novel describes in detail the slums where the immigrants live. For example, they live with mites, rats, and roaches (135). The immigrants also live in cramped quarters (135). The only people profiting from the illegal and legal immigrants are the landlords. The restaurant where Kanaan and his compatriots eat is also disgusting--only the flies do not have to pay for their meals (112). On the job, the working conditions are terrible. Blacks are treated the worse. There is, of course, no social security, the wages are poor, and the list goes on.

With all the problems facing migrant workers in the novel, the workers decide to unite. They believe that it is their duty to fight. They must fight against oppression. Finally, there is a call for a general strike. However before they go forward with the strike they must get clearance from the marabout and the cowry shell reader. The first strike was delayed because of bad signs (212). The novel satirizes the manner in which these two diviners (the marabout and the cowry shell reader) are manipulated by Kanaan. The two had foreseen bad omens to continue the strike. So Kanaan played on their jealousy of one another, had them speak before the group, told each one that the other had agreed with the strike and out of jealousy they tried to outdo each other to see who could convince the crowd to go ahead with the strike.

The climate was very tense in Paris. There were many worker strikes. The army had been called in to make the blacks workers return to their jobs. Nevertheless, the migrant workers win several small battles. Promises were made by the government to convince them to go back to work. Now the workers strategize their next move. For the first time in the novel, Kanaan is happy. He has friends, a new girlfriend, the worker's first strike was successful and he joyfully cries, "Quel jour! Quelle splendeur! O beauté, ô plénitude! . . . . Je suis en vie! Toujours en vie! Et j'ai des amis" 'What a day! How magnificent! Oh Beauty, Oh Joy! I am living the life! Still living the life! And I have friends' (243).

This happiness is short-lived because soon some Whites are killed in one of the many strikes occurring around the city. Rumors spread that the authorities are blaming the disaster on the labor unions. Now it is worse for the black workers. They try to meet in secret to avoid the spies. More and more immigrant housing is set on fire. Thirteen in all. There are more calls for another strike but many believe it would be too dangerous. They were right. Many of them are killed prior to the general strike.

The novel ends as it began--with Kanaan having a nightmare. The reader is sent off into a faraway place. The reader wonders if Kanaan is at heaven's gate or as the novel



suggests, he was having a bad dream. The crescendo of the word *Chaîne* increases near the end of the novel. But where did the dream start and which part of the story did happen or did not happen. Unclear. Certainly. As the future of the migrant worker is unclear.

Indeed, the workers as well as Kanaan are in chains. They are trapped in a system in which they find little relief. The only solace is their unity and working together to secure a better future. The magnitude of the force of the chains and the individual links of chains permeate every page of the novel. They are chained or enslaved to a meager existence. Chained to suffer racism, degradation, substandard living conditions. Kanaan's hope and salvation come from his solidarity with his countrymen. Relief comes when he can escape the horrors of daily living through numerable nightmares and dreams. Relief comes near the end when he believes he has journeyed to heaven. Relief comes when he awakens from the final nightmare and he is still living. What is his response to the unending chain? Perhaps the answer can be found in part when he asks the question, "Mais qui est le maître de fil de chaîne?. . . Je me soumets à mon maître qui qu'il soit!" 'But who is the master of this link of chains. I will submit to my master whoever it is!' (309). The answer to his redemption rests in a higher power. In a higher being who will emancipate him and his countrymen from their chains.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup>These are my divisions of the text.

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