

**A GENDER ANALYSIS OF HELON HABILA'S
TRAVELLERS**

Maasuur Demian Deakaa
*Department Of English,
Benue State University, Makurdi*
07037704622
deakaad@gmail.com

&

Terhemba Hwande
*Department Of English
Akawe Torkula Polytechnic, Makurdi.*
08054436905

Abstract

Gender issues encompass a wide range of challenges and inequalities faced by women and girls in various aspects of their lives. While, significant progress has been made in recent years, many issues persist rooted in culture and tradition. It is in this light that researchers must continue to fight this menace. This paper is borne out of this conception and attempt has been made to tackle this menace through a literary analysis of Habila's novel which exposes and educates his readers of the need to treat people well irrespective of their sexes. The paper employs a thematic analysis of the text as well as character portrayal which expose the ills of gender inequality as they affect the people of the novel. With this exposition, the general public is advised to desist from issues that are inimical to the relationship between the sexes. Using the framework of Feminism, it is discovered that mischief makers rely on culture and tradition to maltreat the female gender, a habit which we must desist from.

Introduction

Gender issues in Nigeria have been a subject of intense debate for several decades. Nigeria, like many other African countries, is a patriarchal society where women are often discriminated against and denied equal access to education, employment, and political representation. Historically, the Nigerian culture has been characterized by traditional gender roles that assign specific roles and responsibilities to men and women. Men are expected to be the breadwinners and protectors of the family, while women are expected to be homemakers and caretakers of children. This traditional division of labor has contributed to the marginalization of women in the Nigerian society.

The Nigerian government has made some efforts to address gender inequality. For example, the National Gender Policy was introduced in 2006 to promote gender equality in all sectors of Nigerian society. The policy aims to eliminate gender-based violence, promote women's participation in politics and decision-making, and increase women's access to education, employment, and health care. However, implementation of the policy has been slow, and many Nigerian women continue to face discrimination and violence.

One of the most significant gender issues in Nigeria is education. Although Nigeria has made significant progress in increasing access to education, gender disparities persist. According to a UNESCO Report, in 2018, “the net enrollment ratio for girls in primary school was 80%, compared to 85% for boys. In secondary school, the net enrollment ratio for girls was 47%, compared to 54% for boys” (12). This gender gap is partly due to cultural beliefs that prioritize boys' education over girls' education. As a result, many Nigerian girls are denied the opportunity to pursue education and fulfill their potential.

Another significant gender issue in Nigeria is violence against women. Domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment are prevalent in the Nigerian society, and many women are reluctant to report such incidents due to the stigma and shame associated with being a victim. According to the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, “31% of Nigerian women have experienced physical violence, and 14% have experienced sexual violence” (19). These figures highlight the urgent need to address gender-based violence in Nigeria.

Women's political representation is another area where gender inequality is evident in Nigeria. Although Nigeria has made some progress in increasing women's participation in politics, women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making positions. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, “women make up only 4.4% of Nigeria's National Assembly (21). This underrepresentation of women in politics means that

women's perspectives and needs are often ignored in policymaking and decision-making processes.

Religion is another factor that contributes to gender inequality in Nigeria. Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions in Nigeria, and both have been criticized for promoting patriarchal values and beliefs. For example, some interpretations of Islam and Christianity suggest that women should be submissive to men and should not have leadership roles in society. These beliefs reinforce gender stereotypes and limit women's opportunities for advancement. Economic factors also contribute to gender inequality in Nigeria. Women in Nigeria are more likely to work in the informal sector, where they earn lower wages and have less job security than men. Women are also less likely to own property or have access to credit, making it more challenging for them to start and sustain businesses. These economic disparities contribute to women's overall marginalization in the Nigerian society. Obviously, gender issues in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, requiring a comprehensive approach to address them. This is why this study uses a literary approach towards fighting this menace. Accordingly, Helon Habila's novel, the *Travellers*, is used as the study case through a theoretical framework of feminism.

Feminism is a complex and diverse socio-political movement that advocates for the equality and liberation of women. It encompasses a range of theories, perspectives, and goals aimed at addressing and dismantling gender-based discrimination, oppression, and inequality. According to Judith Lorber, a prominent sociologist, feminism can be understood as "a belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (4). This definition highlights the fundamental objective of feminism to challenge and transform the unequal power dynamics and societal norms that marginalize women. Feminism encompasses various waves and strands of thought. The first wave, commonly associated with the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focused on suffrage and women's legal rights. The second wave, emerging in the 1960s, sought to address broader issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and gender roles. The third wave, beginning in the 1990s, expanded the feminist discourse by incorporating intersectionality and recognizing the diverse experiences of women based on factors such as race, class, and sexuality.

Intersectional feminism, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, "emphasizes the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and highlights the experiences of marginalized women. It acknowledges that gender discrimination intersects with racism, classism, ableism, and other forms of social inequality" (19). It has played a pivotal role in challenging societal norms and advocating for gender equality in various domains. It has

influenced policy changes, such as the implementation of laws against gender-based violence, the promotion of equal pay, and advancements in reproductive rights. Feminist activism and scholarship have also brought attention to issues such as sexual harassment, objectification, and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

Feminism has contributed to significant changes in society, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting inclusivity. It has influenced cultural attitudes and perceptions surrounding women's rights and gender equality. Through feminist activism, campaigns, and grassroots movements, awareness has been raised about issues such as reproductive justice, body positivity, and LGBTQ+ rights. One important aspect of feminist theory according to Ann Dobie is the concept of patriarchy. She refers to "patriarchy as a system of power and social organization in which men hold primary authority and dominance over women" (323). Feminists argue that patriarchy perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing gender norms, expectations, and stereotypes that limit women's opportunities and autonomy. By challenging patriarchal structures, feminism seeks to dismantle these power imbalances and create a more egalitarian society.

Feminist scholarship has also expanded the understanding of gender and its intersections with other forms of social identity. For instance, queer feminism examines how gender and sexuality intersect, recognizing the experiences of individuals who fall outside traditional heterosexual and gender norms. Additionally, transnational feminism highlights the experiences of women from diverse cultural, racial, and national backgrounds, emphasizing the global nature of gender inequality and the importance of addressing it within a broader context. Critics of feminism often misunderstand or misrepresent its goals, leading to misconceptions about the movement. Some argue that feminism seeks to undermine or overpower men, but this is a mischaracterization. Feminism aims to challenge patriarchal structures and systems that perpetuate gender inequality, with the ultimate goal of achieving equality and justice for all genders.

It is important to note that feminism is not a monolithic ideology, and different individuals and groups may hold varying perspectives and approaches within the movement. Debates and disagreements exist within feminism regarding issues such as sex work, pornography, and the inclusion of transgender individuals. These discussions contribute to the ongoing evolution and growth of feminist theory and practice. In conclusion, feminism is a multifaceted movement that seeks to address and dismantle gender-based discrimination and inequality. It encompasses various waves, theories, and approaches, with the aim of achieving social, political, and

economic equality for women. By recognizing the intersectionality of different forms of oppression, feminism strives for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Synopsis/ Brief Review of the Novel

Helon Habila's novel, *Travellers*, explores various issues surrounding gender, including gender inequality, gender-based violence, and the social expectations placed on men and women in the Nigerian society. The novel is set in the early 21st century and follows the stories of three Nigerian travelers who met on a flight from Lagos to London. Their discussion reveals a lot of gender imbalances in the society. According to Iorwuese Gogo

the plot of the novel is a diasporic narrative that reveals the experiences of immigrants especially of those from war torn Africa and the Middle East in Europe. The novel is a set in Europe revolving around cities like Berlin, Basel, London, and Lampedusa Island where the unnamed narrator encounters various immigrants who tell him their stories of life in Europe and the horrible means through which they get to Europe. (1)

Gogo is right in his review as the novel is an eclectic of the experiences of African migrants looking for greener pastures because their countries have failed to provide for the basic amenities of life. With this exposition, the author is trying to educate African people that all is not rosy even in the cities of Europe hence the need to wake up and revamp the economies of their countries.

To corroborate the above, Lena Englund states that *Travellers* “captures the complex and intricate situations of refugees and migrants of Europe, providing insights about urgent social issues such as inequality, racism, and discrimination. The novel also raises questions relating to human rights discourses and how they connect with personal history” (1). *Travellers* manifests features of postmigrant conditions with its focus towards the future and seeing society itself as postmigrants, particularly through its depictions of dignity.

According to Lavonne Roberts “*Travellers'* displaced characters wrestle with finding footing where they feel no connection. They all crave the stories “traded as a currency among homeless, rootless people” because “if they keep their memories alive then nothing has to die” (3). She adds that

but Habila never asks the reader to pity them; only to see them as human beings. And because of his powerful writing, it is impossible not to love them. Every story succeeds on its own terms, however, it's in the interweaving of narratives that deftly illustrates the complexity of the immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker experience, but it's so

much more. *Travellers* is as a character-driven series of love stories, but not in the traditional sense. It is about what people do to save their loved ones from suffering—sometimes this only leads to more suffering, but the point is that they try. (4)

There's a beautiful chaos to all Habila's interlinked narratives that takes us to the heart of the matter: how we make peace with the entanglements of the past and present. But the real question *Travelers* asks is: what is home? Like a master chemist, Habila's titration of themes teaches us that when we are lost our internal compass isn't attached to geography, but to our hearts. Slowly, we come to learn that when a home can neither be returned to or fully claimed, home is love, even in the absence of roots. *Travelers* will make you feel grateful. Moreover, it will reinforce your belief in the connection to strangers, who are not strangers. They are you and I. They are everyone.

Thematic Exposition

One of the main themes in *Travellers* is gender inequality. Habila portrays the gender inequality that exists in Nigerian society through the character of Irikefe, a young woman who works as a journalist in Lagos. Irikefe is ambitious and intelligent, but she faces numerous obstacles in her career due to her gender. For example, she is consistently overlooked for promotions and is often asked to do menial tasks because of her gender. Habila portrays the unfair treatment of Irikefe and highlights the challenges that women face in male-dominated industries. Habila explores the challenges that women face in Nigerian society, including gender inequality and gender-based violence. For example, Irikefe, a young woman working as a journalist in Lagos, faces discrimination and sexism in her workplace. Habila writes, “Irikefe had been at the magazine for three years now, but she was still a lowly reporter, relegated to doing the menial work that nobody wanted” (43). This quote highlights the gender inequality that exists in male-dominated industries.

Another gender issue that Habila explores in *Travellers* is gender-based violence. The character of Okolo is a wealthy businessman who is physically abusive to his wife, Eunice. Okolo's violence towards Eunice is a reflection of the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigerian society. Habila portrays the ways in which society often turns a blind eye to this violence, and how women are often blamed for their own abuse. Eunice is constantly criticized for not being able to control her husband's violent behavior, and she is even blamed for “provoking” him.

Habila also explores the social expectations placed on men and women in Nigerian society. The character of Ahmed is a Nigerian immigrant living in London who struggles to meet the expectations of his family and

community. Ahmed is expected to provide for his family and support his siblings financially, but he struggles to do so because of the economic challenges he faces in London. Habila portrays the pressure that Nigerian men face to be successful and financially stable, and the ways in which these expectations can be detrimental to their mental health. On the other hand, the character of Mariam challenges traditional gender roles in Nigerian society. Mariam is a successful businesswoman who owns chains of boutiques in Lagos. She is also a single mother and has raised her daughter on her own. Habila portrays Mariam as a strong and independent woman who defies societal expectations of what a woman should be. Mariam's success and independence challenge the notion that women are meant to be subservient to men and that their primary role in society is to be wives and mothers.

Love is another major theme in *Travellers*. The novel portrays different forms of love, including romantic love, family love, and self-love. The character of Mariam represents self-love and self-sufficiency. She is a successful businesswoman who has raised her daughter on her own. Habila writes, "She had no husband, no man to fend for her, but she had herself, and her hard work had brought her this far" (83). This quote illustrates Mariam's determination and resilience as she navigates the challenges of being a single mother and a successful entrepreneur. This is done on purpose so that the Nigerian woman can take a cue from Mariam as she steers through this male dominated society. Apart from the thematic preoccupation of the novel which bothers on gender issues, the novelist uses different characters to make a commentary about gender inequality in the society.

Mariam is one of the main female characters in *Travellers*. She is a successful businesswoman who has raised her daughter, Miriam, on her own. Mariam represents self-love and self-sufficiency in the novel. She is determined and resilient, and her success in business is a testament to her hard work and determination. Habila writes, "She had no husband, no man to fend for her, but she had herself, and her hard work had brought her this far" (83). Mariam's character represents the strength and independence of Nigerian women who must navigate the challenges of being a single mother and a successful entrepreneur.

Eunice is another female character in *Travellers* who faces significant challenges as a migrant woman. She is traveling to London to visit her husband, but she experiences discrimination and racism at the airport. Habila writes, "She saw the way the white woman at the counter looked at her, the way she hesitated before speaking, as if Eunice's accent was a disease" (62). This quote illustrates the challenges that migrant women face in navigating unfamiliar cultures and dealing with discrimination. Eunice's character also highlights the sacrifice and hardship that migrant women endure to provide

for their families.

Irikefe is a young woman working as a journalist in Lagos. She faces discrimination and sexism in her workplace, which highlights the gender inequality that exists in Nigerian society. Habila writes, "Irikefe had been at the magazine for three years now, but she was still a lowly reporter, relegated to doing the menial work that nobody wanted" (43). Irikefe's character represents the struggle of women to break into male-dominated industries and the need for greater gender equality in the workplace.

Joy is another female character in *Travellers* who represents the challenges faced by young girls in Nigerian society. She is a young girl who is forced to marry an older man, despite her dreams of continuing her education. Habila writes, "The man, a forty-five-year-old businessman from Kaduna, had promised her father that he would pay her school fees and take care of her" (148). This quote illustrates the exploitation of young girls in Nigeria who are forced into marriages for economic reasons, often at the expense of their education and future opportunities.

In conclusion, the female characters in Habila's novel, *Travellers*, represent the challenges faced by women in Nigerian society, including discrimination, gender inequality, and exploitation. Mariam represents the strength and resilience of Nigerian women who must navigate the challenges of being a single mother and a successful entrepreneur. Eunice and Joy's characters highlight the challenges faced by migrant women and young girls in Nigeria, respectively. Finally, Irikefe's character represents the struggle of women to break into male-dominated industries and the need for greater gender equality in the workplace.

Works Cited

- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color". *Stanford Law Review*. NO 43 Vol. 6, 1991,1241-1299.
- Dobie, B. Ann. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. London: Blackwell, 2009
- Englund, Lena. "Undignified Migration: Representations of the Refugees in Helon Habila's *Travellers*". *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, Vol 11, Issue2, 2020
- Habila, Helon. *Travellers*, London: W.W. Norton, 2019.