

Helon Habila's *Travellers* as a Narrative of Trauma

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Abstract

The Study investigates Travellers using Laurie Vickroy's multidisciplinary interpretative framework to show how readers can meditate on a variety of human responses to trauma. Previous studies about trauma have emphasised the collective description of the experiences of victims as related to a common adversity or condition. This study focuses on the individual responses of characters to the trauma of voluntary or involuntary immigration. Engaging this framework, the experiences of major characters in Habila's Travellers are explored. The unnamed narrator in Helon Habila's Travellers occupies a vantage point which pulls the story together in unexpected ways, bringing the lives of different immigrants into view. This study employs a qualitative/descriptive method for the research. These migrants share the common experience of trauma as they grapple with the different conditions that plague them. This backdrop allows the reader to interrogate the physical, social and mental state of the characters. These characters include: the unnamed narrator, David/Moussa, Manu, Basma, Rachida and Omar, Karim Abdulbashir, and Juma. The study concludes that emigration to the Global North constitutes a location for psychoanalytic studies based on individually diverse experiences and responses, which can include drifting, repeating patterns, pragmatizing, protecting, rebellion and self-harm.

Keywords: Trauma theory, Helon Habila, Travellers, Global North, Global South

Introduction

This study adopts Laurie Vickroy's multidisciplinary interpretative framework to show how readers can meditate on a variety of human responses to shock, beyond repression, trauma and repetition. Vickroy uses Mary Root's postulations as a clinical psychologist who explains that "experiences are insidious because they are endemic to particular class situations that are repeated in ways that maintain hierarchies of dominance" (132). This method places emphasis on the victim's experience of events rather than the events themselves.

Habila depicts the fragmented lives of global migrants from the global South not as an organic description of one great traumatic event but as fragmented narratives of people who respond to their experiences differently. This study draws upon the field of trauma theory to examine the circumstances of their social, political, economic, cultural and psychological realities. Habila's literary construction of different characters displays a realisation that personality types respond

differently to traumatic events. However, the binding force which draws them together is their varied experiences of migration and trauma. The fractured lives of the migrants are depicted practically in the manner in which Habila pieces the storyline together. In the beginning, it is predictable that the narrator is a privileged migrant, but a simple twist demotes him to the position of a refugee. This shift in rank is necessary for the narrator to experience firsthand the pain of an underprivileged migrant; in addition, it gives a glimpse of another subplot, which promises a happier ending.

Objectives of the Study: To investigate the specific causes of trauma to major characters in *Travellers*.

- i. To identify their responses to these events using suppositions in trauma theory.

Trauma Narrative

An interrogation of trauma theory must recognise the contribution of its earliest theorisations, which include the foundational proponents from psychoanalytic theories. Other foundational writers have drawn from their work to propose a closer and more practical application of trauma studies to collective historical events. Most vocal among them is Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience Trauma Narrative and History* (1996) which draws its inspiration from psychoanalytic theories of forebears such as Freud and Lacan. Caruth reiterates Freud's vision of the history of trauma with close reference to the captivity of the Jews, the deeds of Moses and the description of what Freud calls "traumatic neurosis" this is explained as the symptom of the effect of a traumatic escape; for example, from an accident that an individual has experienced. There is a period of latency, when the effect is not apparent. Later, the psychical and motor symptoms appear, which can be ascribed to his shock of whatever happened at the time of the accident. According to Caruth: "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence." (17)

According to Craps Stef, trauma theory emerged, promising to infuse the study of literary texts with new relevance. He quotes Caruth's assertion about how "trauma forms a bridge between disparate historical experiences... listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity, and to the creation of new forms of community" (46). But Craps argues that Caruth's own work failed to live up to the cross-cultural ethical engagement:

Remarkably, however, the founding texts of the field (including Caruth's own work) largely fail to live up to this promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. They fail on at least three counts: they marginalise or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures; they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity; and they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma. As a result of all of this, rather than promoting cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities (46).

Pederson Joshua (2018) refers to Dominick LaCapra's argument that texts featuring an indirect link to trauma might be thought of as partaking in a unique genre – one that LaCapra refers to as “traumatic realism” In this genre, metaphor mediates the relationship between reality and catastrophe. The second wave of theorists that Pederson identifies produced a variety of insights that alter and expand the understanding of the ways in which trauma and narratives interact. “Gabriele Schwab constructs a model that addresses transgenerational trauma in literature” (105), saying literary narratives may also pass trauma from generation to generation. The previous generations transmit unresolved conflicts to their descendants. These unintegrated traumas manifest themselves in texts like ghosts; unseen but not unnoticed in the texts of transgenerational trauma. The pains that pass from one generation to the next inflect narrative in terms of silence, disruption and indirection. Next, he discusses how Ilka Saal looks at different traumas which tend to link to one another in narratives. For Saal, it is indicative of our tendency to read a current trauma through the lens of a previous one.

More recent critics such as Michelle Balaev have proven that the newest criticisms have employed psychoanalytic and semiotic theories that restructure how trauma functions in literature. According to Balaev, “Many critics who address the rhetorical components of trauma explore both how and why traumatic experience is represented in literature by combining psychoanalytic theory with postcolonial theory or cultural studies” (3). Previous theoretical approaches showed restrictive and universal interpretations of trauma, which led to single conclusions about the nature of trauma. Balaev's collection of essays with different approaches to trauma shows that: “A single conceptualisation of trauma will likely never fit the multiple and often contradictory depictions of

trauma in literature because texts cultivate a wide variety of values that reveal individual and cultural understandings of the self, memory, and society” (8).

Vickroy’s development of trauma theory is analytical of personalized responses to emerging catastrophic effects of war, oppression, poverty, colonisation and individual psyche. Some of her investigations have been geared towards the relationship between trauma and displacement, particularly when there is a traumatic separation from the homeland. Vickroy investigates the work of exiled Cuban writer, Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990) as exemplary of how “the traumas of revolution, oppression and dislocation produce a fragmented, isolated and dissociated identity and an aesthetic sensibility compelled to both critique and reconnect to homeland (Vickroy, 2005, p.109)”. In her *Reading Trauma Narratives* (Vickroy b, 2015), Vickroy combines multidisciplinary approaches to address a broad range of possible contexts and extensive ramifications of trauma, which focus on psychological research. This is because it considers the interrelationship of cultural, cognitive and physiological contributions to the production and evaluation of emotions. In her own words:

Trauma fiction provides scenarios that confront readers with subjective endurance in the face of crisis and conflict, representing how defensive responses are created out of many types of wounding. This fiction also provides a contemplative and experiential link to traumatic processes (Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival* 24), effectively charting the remnants of characters’ traumas and fear-producing associations, as well as the fixed ideas that help them cope. These texts involve readers in the worlds that traumatised individuals try to construct for themselves, where they build psychological defences against threats (Vickroy b, 2015, xi).

Vickroy’s engages in a review of Svetlana Alexievich’s work on trauma among the Soviet women veterans of World War II. She employs cultural, feminist and socio-political approaches to trauma to analyse Alexievich’s process of helping women veterans claim their testimonial voices, revealing socially suppressed traumatic effects. Vickroy uses Alexievich’s archive of testimonies to analyse the suppressed traumatic effects that are recognisable in their testimonies and how they individually manage to cope with these traumatic memories after many years. According to Vickroy:

Though Alexievich has been accused of creating essentialist portraits of women as life-givers, the women also portray themselves this way, insisting that their strong sense of gendered identity and values, deeply embedded from their childhood, allowed them to survive war. This is an ironic response given that some women found self-worth and independence in wartime, revealing the complex mix of views of gender and war then. Testifying to trauma, especially from within a society that had downplayed its people's suffering, has important personal, cultural, and historical implications (Vickroy c, p.78).

Travellers

Habila's *Travellers* has received critical attention from various scholars. Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2020) pays attention to the embodied act of narration explored by Habila in *Travellers* as a mode of cultivating a compassionate understanding of forcibly displaced persons and their lifestyles in prolonged transit. Helga applied Judith Butler's postulations about the eradicated and unmourned "Others" in the narrative about refugee experiences. Habila's protagonist is seen as a person who learns to listen to other people's stories compassionately while distancing himself from the abstract projections of refugee subjecthood. Ramsey-Kurz's stance about the distancing of Habila's protagonist is arguable because the established system succeeds in muting his voice to the point of hopelessness, until the almost retired doctor at the camp takes special interest in his case. It is their special effort that restores him to his former level of the cosmopolitan migrant.

But Nadia's (2024) essay examines Habila's *Travellers* and Hamid's *Exit West* as literature about mobility that mirrors new directions and developments in the 21st century refugee novels. The so-called new nomad is seen as a person whose life is constantly tied to involuntary mobility and migration. The refugee as the new nomad in Europe stands out in contrast to the demonised representations of refugees in the media. According to Butt, Habila calls his characters 'travellers' and not refugees because they are ravaged by civil war, violence, oppression, genocide or economic depravity. In a study that adopted psychoanalytic theory to analyse events and personalities, Obakare Henry and Babogha Julius (2021) found that through the assemblage of binaries, the impacts of the refugee crisis on the migrant and host are equalised. The impact of the binaries was highlighted through the motifs of journey, suffering, resilience, adventure, lack and rejection. In *Travellers*, the position of migrant and host as being in a state of equalisation sounds exaggerated. Both host and migrant face similar struggles especially when seen from the point of

relationships, but the host almost always enjoys privileges above the migrant. For example, the three-year sentence given to Katharina for manslaughter after the death of Moussa. She had the opportunity to rebuild her life. It is questionable that a migrant would have been given the same sentence and leverage. During the conversation between the narrator and Abdulbashir, the narrator explains that: “A black person’s relationship with Europe would always need qualification – he or she couldn’t simply be native European, there had to be an origin explanation.” (Travellers 165). The position of “other” is firmly placed upon the migrants.

Usono Ekikereobong and Onyema Kikanwa (2024) adopted Ato Quayson’s tenet in postcolonial theory about the myth of migrant utopia. The paper showed that the migration process is traceable to colonial systems. It showed that in *Travellers* references to other lands are equally barren. The paper gave focus to the illusion of a migrant paradise. In another study that contrasted Habila’s *Travellers* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*, Akinsete Tolulope and Ojo Iyanuoluwa pay attention to the concept, place and essence of home as well as the forces behind the condition of the disenchantment experience as a reality of migration. Their paper adopted Bhaba’s concept of the Unhomely and Said’s Orientalism for the study. The findings revealed that the idea of home, migratory impulse and disenchantment are prevalent motifs in both novels. This motif is in tandem with the narrator’s thoughts in *Travellers*: “What do deportees feel: relief, shame, anger? Surely, they must feel relief to be away from all that European suspicion and alienation? And yet, some of them, no sooner do they arrive than they begin to plot their return. It is as if some homing device, focused toward Europe, is implanted in their brains, and it never stops humming till their feet are on European soil (109).

Banita Gabriella’s (2021) paper tackles the problem of refugees’ representation by cosmopolitans. The relationship between the cosmopolitan protagonist and several refugees is scrutinised using Sam Durrant’s description of “cosmopolitan privilege”, which cannot truly reflect the struggles of the refugees. The protagonist in *Travellers* comes close to meeting this understanding when he accidentally becomes a refugee himself. Nevertheless, he has options that others cannot access. Banita believes that Habila has succeeded in achieving a self-critical recognition that shows a partial and tainted position about the plight of refugees.

Existing studies have focused on migration, identity and refugee representations in *Travellers*, often privileging thematic or ideological readings of the text. This study shifts attention to the differentiated psychological responses of individual characters to traumatic experiences. Drawing

on Laurie Vickroy's multidisciplinary model, the study analyses how diverse coping mechanisms – such as drifting, repetition, pragmatism, protection and rebellion and self-harm – are narratively constructed and experienced by characters.

Discussion

The individual stories which are portrayed in *Travellers* show a complex type of disillusionment that is highly personalised in nature. These personalised responses form the crux of this study about trauma in Habila's *Travellers*.

The Unnamed Narrator

The narrator in *Travellers* is a doctoral student who is striving to finish his dissertation about African history at the 1884 Berlin Conference. The unnamed narrator always experiences hesitation when he must decide to transition between geographical spaces. In his mind, he equates the experience of leaving, or departure, to death. He is to leave the US for Berlin with his wife, Gina, who had just won a scholarship. It should have been a welcome idea, because it would encourage him to resume his research, but he reflects: "Still I hesitated because I knew every departure is a death, every return a rebirth. Most changes happen unplanned, and they always leave a scar. (12)

His marriage to Gina soon faces its harshest challenge after Gina's miscarriage. He is expected to stand strong as a supportive husband to his wife. But the dynamics of the relationship have been reversed in this situation. Gina had always been the assertive and pragmatic wife, who turns over the facts of any matter to conclude. For the first time, Gina is emotionally, psychologically and physically vulnerable:

...something shifted in Gina. She stopped going out; she cried all day; she stopped eating. There wasn't much I could do; I sat by her side, held her hand. I reminded her we were still young and there'd be opportunities to try again...she turned her face to the wall and curled into a ball. Making herself smaller, like a tiny foetus (Habila 12)

The narrator starts drinking alcohol and the couple grow further apart until their separation. He seems to be adrift in life. Before his marriage to Gina, she had described him as having a fear of commitment. He occupies a privileged position as a cosmopolitan protagonist, but an invisible force always pulls him into the affairs of other less privileged migrants. This is how he meets

Mark, Eric, Stan and Uta. The initial trauma of losing his unborn child and being unable to find closure finds him drifting more deeply into the lives of others. The protagonist is incapable of protecting Gina from the vicissitudes of life, but he is available for others, who function as a distraction from the core problem in his marriage. He is soon invited to a protest, and he witnesses a riot staged by refugees. He continues in this pattern until his chance meeting with Portia who lives in the apartment next to him.

Again, he strikes a friendship, which later develops into a romantic relationship. Portia invites him to Basel and later to Lusaka. He is constantly running towards any outlet that can carry him along. After his refugee camp experience, he finally returned home to Nigeria. The process of recuperation becomes embarrassing, especially for his mother, who tells family and friends about how his wife will soon be joining him. Until finally, his father offers him his savings so that he can return and put his life in order.

Metaphorically, it is a state of disillusioned homelessness swirling away in whichever way the stormy sea of life is blowing. This cosmopolitan protagonist has not escaped homelessness despite his privileged position. He is just as troubled as the other migrants crossing the sea in dinghy boats. Bhaba's theorisation about unhomeliness applies to the unnamed narrator: "Although the 'unhomely' is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradiction (Bhaba 142). This is graphically displayed when the narrator spends hours looking out to the sea in the refugee camp. Other inmates were watching and reliving the troubling memories of how their boats had capsized at sea; the narrator was also there, even though he had come to the North on a plane with a student's passport.

Response /coping mechanism

The unnamed narrator responds to the trauma in his private life by finding company with other less privileged migrants whom he meets in Berlin. His sense of direction is unfocused; therefore, he is easily dragged into other people's affairs as he directs his sympathy and time to others rather than the obvious relationship problem with Gina. His sense of drifting has the effect of destroying their relationship. According to a study conducted by Franz et al, Experiential Avoidance (EA) which is associated with trauma symptoms, is a condition where there is an avoidance in facing perceived traumatic experiences, especially during pregnancy. The study revealed thus:

Trauma symptom's severity was associated with higher levels of EA across the 2 weeks; however, among women, the impact of trauma symptoms on EA was no longer significant when support from a partner was above average quality or higher...Conclusion: Findings highlight the protective role of high-quality support from intimate partners and suggest that trauma-related interventions targeting partner support processes, especially those implemented during pregnancy, might enhance recovery and prevent further distress and dysfunction among pregnant women experiencing trauma symptoms (Franz et al 2).

In Gina's case, it was the experience of a miscarriage. Partner support was especially crucial in her condition. When the narrator decided not to return to America with Gina, her hope is expressed simply in these words: "We used to be happy, she said. And I knew she meant before the miscarriage. 'I thought if we came to Berlin, together, away from everything...I thought Berlin would heal us' (Habla 69). The absence of the healing process destroys their relationship.

David/Moussa

David travels away from home at the age of nineteen. The fundamental family problem is the absence of their father, James Kariku who lives in self-exile. As a famous poet, James moves from one university to the other as an expert in African studies/literature. He refuses to recognize that his days of activism during Kuanda's dictatorial era has elapsed. He continues to move from one fellowship to the other in Global Northern universities. He is regarded in high esteem and treated with high reverence in these institutions. His family returns to Zambia but he stays on for another eighteen years. The dictator is gone, some of Jame's colleagues had died, retired or returned to their villages. But James Kariku keeps on fantasizing about his power and relevance in a country that has long forgotten him. The situation is described as follows:

But the truth was that he had long ceased to be a poet, and most of the resistance was imaginary. But the people there, they loved it. They didn't care. They didn't even know where Zambia was on the map of Africa. As far as they were concerned, all of Africa was one huge Gulag archipelago, and every African poet or writer living outside Africa has to be in exile from dictatorship (Habla 140).

When he finally returns many people do not recognize him. He attempts to catch a plane without a visa, thinking that his reputation will be enough to let him get on a plane. Inadvertently his

absence has taken a toll on his children. David leaves home as an illegal migrant eking out a living as he travels along. He is working on Brigitte's father's farm when he meets her. They want to get married but he gets deported to Mali because that is where he claimed as his home country. He makes it back to Switzerland where Brigitte goes to meet him to contract their marriage. The union barely lasts two years when he begins to complain that she is too controlling. He meets Katharina at a carnival and the relationship leads to another marriage. Their union causes disagreement between Katharina's parents and friends but they protect themselves through isolation. Later on, Katharina discovers that his so-called family is an adoptive one. She identifies the hypocrisy of David always talking about the importance of family, yet being estranged from his own. He becomes religious and insists that Katharina joins him. He does not pay their bills but sends his own money to Mali. This leads to a confrontation where he threatens her with a knife. At this point, their relationship declines into a separation, and later a divorce. During an encounter at the train station, David tries to hug his ex-wife, who pushes him out of fear. He falls on the train track and is crushed to death.

David's tragic end marks the end of his escape from his real identity. He despises the fact that he is from a more privileged background than he wanted to appear. While James Kariku's wife and daughter strive to find closure after his death, David meets with the misfortune of an untimely death while trying to craft a new beginning. He adopts the name Moussa in his attempt to create his new self. He dislikes his father's abandonment of their family, but he inadvertently repeats the same pattern of abandonment.

Response /coping mechanism

David's response to his family's dysfunction is denial and escape. Interestingly, he is found to be repeating a similar pattern of family dysfunction to his father. According to Pederson Joshua (2018), Dominick LaCapra's argument that texts featuring an indirect link to trauma might be thought of as partaking in a unique genre – one that LaCapra refers to as “traumatic realism” in this genre, metaphor mediates the relationship between reality and catastrophe. The second wave of theorists that Pederson identifies produced a variety of insights that alter and expand the understanding of the ways in which trauma and narratives interact. “Gabriele Schwab constructs a model that addresses transgenerational trauma in literature” (105), saying literary narratives may also pass trauma from generation to generation. The previous generations transmit unresolved

conflicts to their descendants. These unintegrated traumas manifest themselves in texts like ghosts; unseen but not unnoticed in the texts of transgenerational trauma. The pains that pass from one generation to the next inflect narrative in terms of silence, disruption and indirection. Next, he discusses how Ilka Saal looks at different traumas which tend to link to one another in narratives. For Saal, it is indicative of our tendency to read a current trauma through the lens of a previous one.

Forster Greg's focus is on the tendency to concentrate on catastrophes that strike in a single moment while ignoring "structural" "insidious" trauma: persistent aching pain often related to enduring societal pressures – like racism or patriarchal oppression.' (107) His model suggests that such pain manifests itself in unique ways. He believes that if an author is to engage structural trauma in a text, he/she must provide deeper, more complex backstories for his characters that give insight into the ways these individuals are imbricated in a social network coloured by insidious trauma. This demands an introspective and deep insight into social history. James Kariku and David Kariku seem unable to settle into conservative family patterns even though they initiate marriages. The family's dysfunction is shown to proceed into a repetitive pattern.

Manu, Rachida, Basma and Omar

These characters are a family. Their movement to the North is motivated by increased racist violence which happened in Libya. Manu is a Libyan-born Nigerian. He was separated from his wife and son in a Germany-bound boat that capsizes. The wife, Basma, and son, Omar, are washed up on the southern Italian Coast. Basma and Omar are rescued by Matteo. But Basma loses her memory, and Matteo convinces her that he had travelled to her country before, and that his marriage proposal was rejected by her parents. He tells her that she is there because she had promised to return to him. Symbolically, the depiction of her effort to plant a rose garden that never flourishes is an indicator of the failure of the relationship. Basma later regains her memory and heads for Checkpoint Charlie.

Response /coping mechanism

In trauma studies, survival-oriented adaptation serves as defence mechanisms to shield individuals from emotional and psychological distress. From the beginning of their journey to the North, he knew that their journey could turn treacherous; therefore, he had a plan. Basma's loss of memory happens naturally as a psychological response to the trauma of their harrowing experience at sea.

This has been identified by theorists as repression. According to Shambavi Kumari, defence mechanisms serve a protective role by shielding individuals from emotional and psychological distress. Studies about defence mechanisms began as early as Sigmund Freud and psychoanalytic theory. Concepts such as repression and denial are unconscious mechanisms aimed at protecting the individual from anxiety and negative emotions. Other theorists built on Freud's work and expanded the understanding of the potential for maladaptive outcomes if used excessively or inflexibly.

Defence mechanisms like rationalisation, intellectualisation, suppression, sublimation, and humour are often adaptive and do not typically require psychiatric treatment unless they are used excessively and interfere with daily functioning or relationships. It is important to remember that the use of defence mechanisms exists on a spectrum, and some degree of their use is a normal part of human psychology (Shambavi 7).

Manu manages trauma with practical survival skills rather than denial. His pragmatic approach is traced to his care for his daughter Rachida while managing a job as a bouncer at a nightclub and his cautious relationship with two women. However, he tells both women about his hope of being reunited with his wife, Basma. Manu believes that she is alive. "If she isn't he'd know, and if she is alive, she'd never rest until she finds them (Habila 83). Manu plans to reunite with his family specifically at Checkpoint Charlie, and it can be deduced that this works out as he had planned.

Karim Albashir

The narrator introduces the reader to Karim Albashir while on transit. Karim is from North Sudan but has settled in Somalia. He leaves Somalia because of the tribal wars and the different factions organised around family ties. His dilemma begins when the son of a warlord expresses interest in marrying his ten-year-old daughter. The young man and his gang use threats and intimidation to force an arrangement for the wedding. Karim methodologically escapes from Somalia the night before the wedding day. He attempts to settle into other countries with his growing family. His son, Mahmood, fell off a balcony of a poorly built apartment and sustained an injury. Karim can only find specialized care for his son in the North. He leaves his wife and daughters in Turkey and travels with his two sons, Fadel and Mahmood. Fadel gets embroiled in religious matters while in Bulgaria, and he reports that his father is a religious fanatic. Soon, Fadel leaves home with a religious group while his father is job hunting. Fadel is almost an adult, and Bulgaria's legal

counsel has declared that Fadel will remain in their custody until he reaches eighteen years and then will make his own decision.

Response /coping mechanism

Karim's response to traumatic events against himself and his family is resilience. According to Asteroid Health, the key factors that contribute to trauma resilience are multifaceted, but support from family and friends is fundamental to navigating adversity.

Positive coping strategies are crucial for managing stressors effectively. Techniques such as mindfulness, problem-solving, and reframing negative thoughts empower individuals to transform adversity into opportunities for growth. Learning to view experiences through constructive lens can significantly contribute to one's resilience. Furthermore, maintaining a sense of self-efficacy is vital. It refers to the belief in one's ability to manage challenges effectively (Asteroid Health np)

Karim finds his way to the North as a medical tourist because of Mahmood's knee injury. He protects his girl-child from premature marriage and fights above all odds to find medical attention for his injured son. By the time Karim tells his story, he has travelled through Yemen, Syria, Turkey, Istanbul, Bulgaria, Basel, and is on his way to Germany because his lawyer has finally helped him acquire five-year asylum papers. He is hopeful that the rest of the family can join him. Karim maintains a clear focus and finally succeeds despite the periods of estrangement between himself and other family members. He is comforted by the action of his daughter who refuses a marriage proposal so that she does not leave her mother alone. All his actions are guided by his resilience to his responsibility of protecting and providing for his family.

Mark/Mary

Mark Chinomba is one of the migrants who came to Germany for studies. He meets the narrator when he responds to Gina's advert for migrants to pose for her portrait for the prize of 50 Euros. For no clear reason, Gina disqualifies Mark. The reader later finds out that her intuition is correct when it is revealed that Mark, unlike the other migrants, had won a scholarship to Germany. Mark's family history reveals that he had a misunderstanding with his father because of his choice of career. His preacher father appreciates his acting only in church; anywhere else is considered a sin. Mark's desire to study Theatre Arts in the university is not supported by his father, but he persists. While on scholarship as a film student to Berlin, he lives in a run-down church with his group of

friends. He mimics his father and deconsecrates the lectern with alcohol just to spite the memory of his father.

Forster Greg explains that psychoanalytic discussions about trauma in the works of Caruth move beyond its applicability to extreme cases such as the holocaust and other types of violations. He focuses on:

...the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather, say, than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of everyday racism. These phenomena are indeed traumas in the sense of having decisive and deforming effects on the psyche that give rise to compulsively repeated and highly rigidified social relations. But such traumas are also so chronic and cumulative, so woven into the fabric of our societies, that they cannot count as "shocks" in the way that Nazi persecution and genocide do in the accounts of Caruth and others (260)

It is later revealed that Mark is actually a transgender person, who was called Mary back home in Malawi. To sever from her biological roots, she writes a letter to Malawi, posing as a friend and saying that Mary had died in an accident. She signs off the letter as Mark and starts living with that identity. During a protest at the refugee camp, someone pushes her off the roof, and she falls to her death.

Response /coping mechanism

Mark/Mary's personal story shows the effect of a dysfunctional relationship where parents insist on reliving their lives through their children. Her response to the pressure of reliving the life of her father is shown first as rebellion against all that her father stands for. She makes a mockery of everything her father believes in. Becoming transgender is the final straw that would break the already delicate relationship. The feigned letter that announces her death is meant to totally sever her relationship with the family. This pressure to conform becomes a trigger for rebellion, estrangement and untimely death.

Juma

Juma stumbles his way to the North while fleeing terrorism in Nigeria. After his arrest, he is kept at a detention camp where he is denied asylum. A group of activists fight against his deportation because his case had been appealed. With their assistance, he escapes the hospital where he is being force-fed with feeding tubes after he goes on a hunger strike. The city of London is divided

over his case. Some want him deported, while others believe that he deserves asylum. He has to be moved around by the so-called Guardians to avoid arrest. He is later traced, arrested and deported. In a twist of fate, the Nigerian government refuses to allow the plane permission to land, so it returns.

Juma's story highlights the plight of the victims of terrorism who flee their countries for safety. Their appalling conditions are painted vividly as pathetic and horrifying. His long letter to the narrator explains that he continues his hunger strike at the detention centre not willingly any longer, but because he has lost the ability to retain food and the will to live.

Response /coping mechanism

Juma draws attention to his plight by going on a hunger strike. This form of self-harm is meant to draw attention to the injustice of his deportation. The process takes a negative toll on his physical and mental health. DMT Fessler's paper discusses the ethical issues around the treatment of patients undergoing hunger strikes. They concern ethical decisions because of the conflict between a doctor's duty to life and their obligation to respect the autonomy of the patient. According to Fessler: "Investigators have noted that patients with often no previous history of psychiatric disorder may manifest megalomaniac and persecutory delusions, auditory hallucinations, somatisation, dissociation, suicidality, and confusion (243). Fessler reveals that the World Medical Association (WMA) instructs that physicians interview hunger strikers daily as the possibility of death draws closer, perhaps they may wish to revise their initial assessment about the value of hunger striking. As much as hunger striking is a physical resolve, it is also deeply psychological in nature. Juma explains that: "I told him I am fasting not because I want to any more, all that has lost meaning to me... I want the perfect food of the gods themselves, and they thought I was joking, but I am serious. I want perfect food, but where can I find it here on earth? (293) Juma's response to trauma is self-harm; in the end, he fails to cope, and he is depicted as gradually succumbing to death.

Findings

The findings of the study reveal that the major characters in Habila's *Travellers* had varied but personal traumatic experiences. Their responses to trauma include Experiential Avoidance, denial and repetition, adaptation and pragmatism, resilience, rebellion, and self-harm.

Conclusion

This study proves that the universalisation of trauma response is indeed questionable and erroneous. Some responses to trauma tend to be culturally driven. In Africa, the expected response to traumatic occurrences is the logical approach, like the comfort offered to Gina by her husband after her miscarriage. Such an approach is based on an African worldview on trauma, where, for instance, it is often assumed, with gratitude, that the death of a beloved family member may have been averted by the death of their animal. In a different cultural context, such rationalisation might sound dismissive to the grieving partner. This study shows that, while some responses can be culturally driven, others can be motivated by the personality of the individual involved. In Habila's *Travellers*, it is shown that trauma requires more specificity than lump descriptions and responses. Laurie Vickroy's focus on individual responses to trauma has illuminated a different angle to the study of Habila's *Travellers*. It has been revealed that differential responses to trauma are individualised.

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