



## Political Push Factors of African-Western Migration as Depicted in Selected African Novels

Zilibele Mtumane; Precious Christine Gwambiwa

Department of African Languages, University of Johannesburg, Republic of South Africa

E-mail: [zmtumane@uj.ac.za](mailto:zmtumane@uj.ac.za)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v7i5.2127>

---

### **Abstract**

This article looks at political factors in African countries that are pushing Africans to move to Western countries in search of greener pastures, as they are demonstrated in African novels. The novels to be considered for this discourse are Dirie and Miller's *Desert Flower*, Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Cole's *Open City*. While the discussion is on political issues pushing Africans to Western countries, when and where necessary, reference will be made to emigration to other countries, even within the Africa continent as well. The concepts of push factors, politics and African-Western migration are defined as part of the introductory section of this discourse. The subheadings of this discourse are introduction, analysis, and conclusion.

**Keywords:** *Political Push; African-Western Migration; African Novels*

### **Introduction**

African countries are still developing politically. Because of this phase of development, there are several issues leading to the deterioration of their political situation. Individuals and families are compelled to migrate to Western communities in search of better living conditions. Authors of African literature (written in English) present factors of African-Western migration in their literary works. These factors include economic, political, social, and environmental factors, among others. This discourse aims at discussing the political factors of this phenomenon. As much as African literature reveals these factors of African-Western migration, very little has been done to study such literature, focusing on this aspect. Gwambiwa (2022), on whose doctoral study this article is based, is, so far, probably the only one who has done so.

According to Zanabazar *et al* (2021:2) push factors are those life situations in one's present homeland that generate dissatisfaction, such as poverty, unemployment, rapid population growth, political repression, and low social status. In support of this definition, Bruzzone (2020:1) defines push factors as reasons that individuals might emigrate from their homes, including poverty, lack of social mobility, violence, and persecution. After gathering these definitions, one can define push factors as crises in one's

home country, which make home uncomfortable for individuals and drive them to other countries. Political instability is one of these crises. This article is going to explain further on this factor.

Modebadze (2010:3) figures out that there are many definitions that can be used to define the term politics. Among the definitions, she quotes Heywood who defines politics as the exercise of power, exercise of authority, the making of collective decisions, the allocation of scarce resources, and the practice of deception and manipulation. Boswell (2020:1) puts it forward that politics is a process of competitive claims-making by rival parties with the aim of mobilising support to put these programmes into action. From the above definitions, one can come up with the idea that politics involves decision making in various groups and encompasses the distribution of power, resources, and status. Hence, the unfair distribution of power, authority, and resources leads into a crisis of political instability. This further gives birth to African-Western migration.

African-Western migration is the movement of Africans from Africa to Western countries, in search of comfortable living conditions. Adeyanju and Oriola (2011) depict it as the movement of Africans to Western countries as they are either forced by various situations at home or attracted by favourable conditions in Western countries. They explain that there are various attractions in the Western world which lure most Africans from their home continents.

## ***Analysis***

According to Thet (2014:1), migration is a global phenomenon that is caused by economic, social, political, cultural, environmental, health, educational and transportation factors. In this subsection, political push factors are discussed.

Political violence in Africa is a matter of concern, which alienates Africans from their home countries, resulting in most fleeing in their numbers to Western communities to save their lives. Bulawayo (2013) addresses the issue of political injustices, in Zimbabwe, through Bornfree and Freedom, who are butchered to death by the supporters of the ruling party, because of supporting the opposition party. These two are labelled as sell-outs because of their political choices. Bornfree and Freedom support a political party that they feel would bail them out from the inhuman treatment fostered by the ruling regime. These killings of innocent people for their choices are an implication of the lack of democracy that makes up most African governments. People are given the freedom to choose political parties but are not guaranteed freedom after they make their choices. The killers' words support this sentiment as they say to Bornfree and Freedom:

“Who are you working for?

Sell-Out

Who is paying you, America, or Britain?

Why don't you scream for America or Britain to help you now?

Friend of the colonists.

Selling the country to the whites.

You think you can just vote for whoever you want?

Vote right now, we want to see, sell-out!

You want change, today we'll show you change.”

(Page 141)

This indicates a regime of dictatorship; whereby ordinary citizens are not given the chance to air out their plight. Their voices are not even heard because of the brutality of the leaders. If one attempts to raise one's voice fighting for one's freedom, then one is inviting death. Therefore, Helms and Leblang (2019) expand that politicians may allow, encourage, or force the emigration of groups that oppose the

regime, to enable the government to discriminate against potential challengers, by encouraging their exit. In this case, violence and extortion of human rights are applied to force the emigration of most Zimbabweans to the West, to eliminate challenge and competition. In this case, death is used as a weapon to deal with competition. This further alienates Africans from their homes, as they are treated as subhuman, who deserve the punishment of losing lives. For the said treatment, Democracy and Freedom leave Zimbabwe for America. Furthermore, Prince Fostalina's cousin visits them from Zimbabwe with burnt scars on his face:

Prince has burn scars on his arms and back where they burned him. He is young but now he looks older than uncle Kojo, looks like Mdawini at home, who has six children. His face is hard and terrible and the light in his eyes is gone ...

(Page 157)

The burnt scars on Prince's face reveal political victimisation. He even suffers from hallucinations that have resulted from political violence and necessarily show mental torture inflicted on the supporters of the opposition party. With this description of how Prince appears when he arrives in America, political victimisation, therefore, is a reason that has forced Prince to leave Zimbabwe for America. He is in America, a place where he can find his refuge.

In mid-2005, the then-president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, ordered an operation 'restore order' to clean up the nation. Most buildings, which were not properly structured, were demolished through the national clean-up campaign. According to Kapp (2005), the demolition of slum dwellers' homes in Zimbabwe, on the orders of then-President Robert Mugabe has left thousands homeless and destitute. Many of the country's 1.3 million orphans were among the hardest hit. Tibaijuka (2005:1) brings out that an estimation of 700 000 people was left homeless, and this caused chaos and suffering among Zimbabwean citizens.

The issue of Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order Campaign) is expressed by Bulawayo in the novel *We Need New Names*. Most residents of Paradise are victims of the presidential orders of Operation Murambatsvina. Murambatsvina is a ChiShona noun that refers to the action of refusing to be dirty. Paradise is demolished because it is a society of low earners. Some use reject material to build their houses. Because the households are not presentable, they are regarded as trash, considering Operation Murambatsvina. Leaders do not care about the reasons why people end up living in those dilapidated shelters. Nobody would like to live in a shanty place like Paradise if finances were okay. Instead of solving the problem of accommodation, and creating decent habitable communities for the poor, the government is inconsiderate. It worsens the situation by leaving the poor homeless. Of course, they are poor, but they are still humans who have the right to shelter. This operation is inhuman and makes the citizens foreigners in their country, as they are left homeless. One can therefore state that the treatment of the marginalised civilians in Zimbabwe and other African countries drives Africans from their countries. These civilians long to be somewhere where they will feel the comfort of a home.

After the 2008 elections in *We Need New Names*, most people feel the injustice and unfair handling of their votes. They are impregnated with the hope that after elections, political leadership is going to change, their voices will be heard, and their expectations of a freer Zimbabwe are going to be born out of this election. Unfortunately, because of the power-hungry and corrupt government, the ruling party manipulates its way into leadership, regardless of losing this election. Most hopes are shattered. The pre-election euphoria is replaced with post-election bitterness and anger. This drives several Zimbabweans to voluntarily migrate to Europe, without being forced or victimised. This is what Helms and Leblang (2022:377) put forward when they say: "We focus on political conditions in the homeland that influence a potential migrant's decision to emigrate involuntarily." This is depicted in the story *We Need New Names*. The narrator hints at the movement of Zimbabweans in their numbers:

Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with loss are crossing borders. Moving, pruning, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing to all over, near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves.

(Page 145)

The above quotation is an illustration of things not well in Zimbabwe, where there is victimisation of citizens because of the expression of their needs, where whites are extorted, workers are exploited, some run out of ideas and suicide is sometimes the only option. Kids are victims of sexual abuse; people are left homeless because their homes are regarded as trash that deserves to be disposed of. All these issues mount on citizens and the government is responsible. That is why Dustmann and Okatenco (2014:53) bring the idea that when individuals are highly satisfied with the local amenities such as their standard of living, quality of public services and overall sense of security, they express far less intention to migrate, compared with highly dissatisfied individuals. The bottom line is that, because the Zimbabwean government neither considers the plight of its citizens nor has people at heart, Zimbabweans leave their home countries in large numbers. This situation does not apply to Zimbabwe alone, which is the nation of concern in *We Need New Names*. Rather, it is witnessed in many African countries. This forces Africans to migrate to the West, hoping that they will find favourable living conditions there.

In the novel *Open City*, Cole addresses most African immigrants in Western countries as refugees fleeing from civil wars and political instability. From one of Julius' visits to the refugee camp, he discusses an illegal Liberian refugee, Saidu, who runs to America, fleeing from war. The situation which Saidu goes through is torturous and horrific. The war situation is unbearable for him. He has lost a sister to diabetes because of lack of proper medical attention. He believes that this condition could not have killed her if it were peaceful times:

His mother and sister were shot to death by Charles Taylor's men. The men returned and took him away with them, to the outskirts of Monrovia ... At the camp, he saw one of his mates, a boy who had been the best soccer player in school: that boy's right hand had been severed at the wrist and had healed to a stump. Others had died. He had seen corpse: but it was seeing that stump where a hand used to be that did it for him, that was when he knew he had no choice.

(Page 65)

Witnessing the death of his mother and sister on its own is psychological torture. As if it's not enough, at the camp, he witnesses more deaths, and one of his peers is crippled because of war. From what he is exposed to, Saidu knows that if he does not act, he is the next victim of political violence. He cannot wait for his death. To him, America is the only destination for his safety. He goes through thick and thin, escaping from the Liberian war to America, to find refuge:

By now, the idea of getting to America was fixed in his mind. In Bamako unable to speak Bamana or French, he'd skulked around the motor park, eating scraps at the marketplace, sleeping under the market tables at night and dreaming sometimes that he was being attacked by hyenas.

(Page 66)

Kieh (2009:7) explains that this Second Liberian Civil War was caused by Taylor's regime which abused human rights and its failure to solve social and economic problems. The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) launched armed attacks, initially against the North-western regions of Liberia on 21 April 1999. The Taylor regime, in return, launched counterattacks against the insurgents, thereby triggering the breaking out of the Second Liberian Civil War. This is typical of most African governments, which are characterised by irresponsibility and power struggle at the expense of the

lives of ordinary civilians. This is a major issue that causes most Africans to move to Western countries, in search of peace and the safety of their lives.

Cole, in *Open City*, also addresses Idi Amin's terrible rule which estranged Ugandans in their country of origin. Idi Amin was one of the African dictators who did not care about the lives of ordinary people but only himself. Julius (a character), describing Idi Amin, says:

In *The Last King of Scotland*, ... This was the story of a man in whom the classical traits of dictatorship had taken the most extreme form. With his extroverted madness-parts anger, fear, insecurity, quicksilver charm - Idi Amin murdered some 300 000 Ugandans during his rule, expelled the large community of Ugandan Indians, destroyed the country's economy, and earned himself as one of the most grotesque stains on Africa's recent history.

(Page 31)

This brutal ruling of Idi Amin's regime makes Uganda an uncomfortable home for the Ugandans, characterised by death, pain, and being crippled. The ruthless ruling of this regime triggered the migration of many Ugandans, fearing for their lives back home. Leopold (2020:202) refers to Idi Amin as Africa's icon of evil. Idi Amin controlled every sector of human lives and never hesitated to kill. From the beginning of his reign as president of Uganda, his leadership had violence. Leopold (*Op cit.*) articulates:

His first days were, unsurprisingly largely spent mopping up the opposition within the army. The killings that were to characterise his rule started right away ... In this phase most of the deaths of the Acholi and Langi soldiers, officers and junior ranks were killed or imprisoned, to consolidate Amin's power base within the army.

Idi Amin started his rule with an iron fist, right away. This means that even ordinary Ugandans were in trouble under his rule. Most people had no option except to run away for their lives. This dictatorship syndrome is typical of most African leaders. Just like the scenario in Zimbabwe during the Mugabe regime, for example, people were killed for supporting the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Around and during the 2008 elections, ordinary people were slaughtered, and others had their hands butchered as a form of punishment for supporting the opposition party. On this point, Cummings *et al.* (2015) agree that violence and conflict force people to migrate from their places of origin. Also, Moore and Shellman (2004) depict that the violation of human rights has a positive impact on the number of refugees that a country produces. With this violation of human rights and the inflicted violence, those people who happen to have a chance, flee from these dangers to Western countries, seeking refuge. Therefore, in this regard, political instability is a critical stance chasing Africans away from home and is one of the causes of international migration.

Moreso, still on political instability as a cause of African movement to Western countries, Cole addresses the plight of Rwandans in the novel *Open City*. The protagonist Julius, one night, when he is in a restaurant in Brussels at Le Panais, drinking, notices many Africans who are flirting and listening to American hip hop which is played in this restaurant. The bartender explains to Julius that these people are from Rwanda:

The realisation that I had been with fifty or sixty Rwandans changed the tenor of the evening for me. It was as though the space had suddenly become heavy with stories these people were carrying. What losses, I wondered, lay behind their laughter and flirting? Most of those there would have been teenagers during genocide. Who among these present, I asked myself, had killed or witnessed killing?

(Page 136)

The fact that there were around sixty Rwandans in the same place, in a Western country, tells a story of the massive migration of Rwandans to the West, the reason being of running away from political instability which might have cost their lives. Beauchamp (2014:1) explains that Rwandan genocide was a tribal war between the Hutus and the Tutsis. It was set in motion by the death of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana. It was a systematic campaign by the Hutus aimed at wiping out the minority Tutsi group. The Hutu government and allied militias slaughtered between eight hundred thousand and one million Tutsis and over a hundred thousand Hutus were also killed, including both moderate Hutus killed by Hutu extremists and those killed by Tutsis in the so-called revenge killings. Because of this brutality of African governments and African leaders, most people are victims of the system. They do not have anywhere to turn to seek protection. Therefore, the only solution in such scenarios is to run away to Western countries, where they are also ill-treated due to racism. To them, that is better than losing their lives at home.

The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution (ACCORD), Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA) and the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), held an expert group meeting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2015. The primary aim of this meeting was to discuss the causes, trends, and challenges of conflict-induced migration in Africa, since African emigration is getting out of hand. Among the causes of African migration to Western countries, they concluded that the African borderlines are not clear, and this is leading to disputes and conflicts between nations. These conflicts are a force of African-Western migration. The porous borders are building conflicts, thereby leading to restlessness or even wars among people in Africa. The borderlines which are not so clear and were discussed in this meeting, are those of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda, Djibouti and Kenya, as well as Somalia and Ethiopia.

The issue of border disputes is also addressed in the work of literature written by Dirie and Miller (1998) in *Desert Flower*. Waris is born into a family of twelve children, and they live near Somalia's border with Ethiopia. Their family is one of the victims of border disputes:

Evidently, during the night, the army had arrived, and now sat encamped all around the road, their tents and trucks stretching as far as I could see. I hid behind the tree and watched them milling about in their uniforms. I was frightened, remembering the other girl's story, certainly I had no one around to protect me, so the men were free to do whatever they pleased. At first sight I hated them. I hated their uniforms. I hated their trucks. I hated their guns. I didn't even know what they were doing, for all I knew, they could be saving Somalia.

(Page 21)

The above quotation points to girl children being victims of rape in a war situation. It also points to the Somali army preparing to fight to save its nation. The restlessness created by the need to protect Somalia from border disputes, may also trigger African-Western migration. This is because, from the image created by the narrator's story, in these scenarios, people would lose their lives. Girls were abused. Therefore, in African literature, unclear border lines between African nations are also responsible for African-Western migration, as African citizens flee for their survival.

## **Conclusion**

This article has discussed political push factors which cause the movement of Africans to the West. These include mainly political violence, and political instability. Most Africans are victims of political instability and are left with no choice except of running away to the West in search of refuge. To add on, civil wars are caused by poor political management and are also causing African-Western migration. Most African governments are characterised by greedy, power-hungry, and corrupt leaders. Ordinary African citizens are suffering because of their leaders. They end up resorting to moving to the West. Border disputes are also a cause of mass movements of Africans to Western countries.

## Reference

- Adeyanju, C.T. and Oriola, T.B. 2011. 'Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration: A Phenomenological Approach.' *Journal of Black Studies*. 42(6) 943-967. DOI: 10.1177/0021934710396876. <http://jbs.sagepub.com>.
- Bulawayo, N. 2013. *We Need New Names*. Florida: Black Bay Books.
- Cole, T. 2011. *Open City*. New York: Faber and Faber.
- Cummings, C., Pacitto, J., Lauro, D. and Foresti, M. 2015. *Why People Move: Understanding the Drivers and Trends of Migration to Europe*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Dirie, W. and Miller, C. 1998. *Desert Flower*. London: Telegram.
- Dustmann, C. and Yoram, W. 2007. 'Return Migration Theory and Empirical Evidence from the UK.' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. 45(2): 236-256. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk>.
- Helms, B. and Leblang, D. 2019. 'Global Migration: Causes and Consequences.' <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.631>. Accessed on 26 June 2022.
- Bruzzo, M. 2021. 'Understanding Migration: Why "Push Factors" and "Pull Factors" Do Not Explain Very Much Part of an occasional series' <https://refugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/7.27.20-Policy-Brief.pdf>. Accessed on 16 September 2022.
- Modebadze, V. 2010 'The term politics reconsidered in the light of recent theoretical developments.' *IBSU Scientific Journal*. 4(1): 39-44.
- Moore, W.H. and Shellman, S.M. 2004. 'Fear of Persecution: Forced Migration.' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 48(5): 723-745.
- Thet, K.K. 2014. 'Pull and Push Factors of Migration: A Case Study in the Urban Area of Monywa Township, Myanmar.' [https://www.worldofstatistics.org/files/2014/03/Pull-and -Push-Factors-of-Migration-Thet-pdf](https://www.worldofstatistics.org/files/2014/03/Pull-and-Push-Factors-of-Migration-Thet-pdf).
- Zanazabar, A., Kho, N.S. and Saranya, J. 2021. 'The Push and Pull Factors Affecting the Migration of Mongolians to the Republic of South Korea.' Web of conference, <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20219001023>. Accessed on 8 November 2022.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).