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Precarious Aspirations: Identity, Irregular Migration and Self-Destruction in Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream*

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Abstract
Grounded in Erik Erikson's theory of identity crisis, this paper examines the interplay between identity, irregular migration, and self-destruction in Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream*. Through close textual analysis, the study interrogates how fractured identity, socio-economic precarity, familial pressure, and the pursuit of imagined prosperity propel many Nigerian youths towards perilous migratory aspirations. While acknowledging the structural realities of unemployment, economic hardship, insecurity, and limited opportunities that continue to shape youth migration in Nigeria, the paper argues that these conditions alone do not fully account for the tragic outcomes associated with irregular migration. Rather, Duruaku's play demonstrates that identity crisis, social competition, impatience, misinformation, and the relentless quest for social validation frequently intensify the desire to seek fulfillment abroad at all costs. By analysing the tragic trajectory of Chimdi, the study reveals how the illusion of the proverbial greener pasture culminates in exploitation, shattered aspirations, and ultimately self-destruction. The paper contends further that Duruaku employs drama as a socially committed medium to interrogate contemporary migration realities and to caution against the uncritical idealisation of overseas mobility. It concludes that addressing irregular migration requires not only structural reforms by the state but also a critical reorientation of youthful aspirations, self-perception, and decision-making. In foregrounding identity crisis as the psycho-social catalyst for irregular migration, the study contributes a fresh perspective to existing scholarship on Nigerian migration literature and contemporary drama.
Keywords: Identity crisis, irregular migration, youth precarity, self-destruction, Nigerian drama, Toni Duruaku.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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Introduction

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2020, p.15) observes that the world is currently experiencing the largest youth population in history, with approximately 1.8 billion young people globally. The tendency to migrate is particularly pronounced among this demographic, as young people remain the most mobile segment of the population. Although international migration has continued to rise, reaching an estimated 304 million migrants worldwide by mid-2024, the aspirations and experiences of youth continue to occupy a central place in contemporary migration discourse (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2020, 2026). The search for improved life prospects, educational opportunities, and economic security has increasingly shaped migration decisions among young people across the globe. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA,2025), Nigeria remains one of the countries with the youngest populations in the world, with nearly two-thirds of its population under the age of 30. The country's population stood at approximately 242.4 million in 2026, with a median age of 18.3 years (Worldometer, 2026). This demographic profile underscores the strategic significance of young people in Nigeria's developmental trajectory. The African Youth Charter defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 35 years, while recognising that member states may adapt this categorisation to reflect their specific socio-cultural realities (African Union, 2006). Given their numerical strength and socio-economic importance, the experiences, aspirations, and vulnerabilities of young people remain central to contemporary discourses on migration and national development. According to Nigeria's National Youth Policy, youths are also defined as citizens between the ages of 18 and 35 years (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2012). Recent demographic estimates indicate that this age cohort constitutes approximately 27.3% of Nigeria's total population, suggesting that more than one-quarter of Nigerians fall within the official youth category (PopulationPyramid.net, 2025). Most young people in Nigeria as a category, like their contemporaries around the globe, especially in Africa, seem to be highly unsatisfied with their lives. They feel deprived of adequate education, healthcare and employment opportunities even when the opportunity presents itself. This lack of satisfaction or lack of self-contentment often leads to identity crisis, and in some cases self-destruction.

In an era marked by intensifying socio-economic competition and uncertainty, young people are increasingly confronted with complex and interrelated challenges that demand urgent attention. While parents and government bear primary responsibility for providing moral guidance and ensuring access to quality education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and gender equity, the Nigerian writer equally has a vital role to play in shaping societal values and responses to these realities. Across the genres of literature, writers function not merely as storytellers but as cultural commentators in illuminating the conditions that define youthful existence and stimulating critical reflection on possible pathways to change. The communal responsibility of the literary artist, therefore, remains indispensable. Rooted in the enduring conception of literature as both a reflection and critique of the society, literary production becomes a means through which writers fulfil their ethical obligation to expose social contradictions and contribute to the pursuit of a more just and humane society. In this regard, Gideon Uzoma Umezuruike (2019) maintains that a writer who recognises the ethical demands of creative engagement "can, to a great extent, help in restoring the health of his ailing nation, propelling its values from

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stagnation to flourishing progression" (p.21). The literary artiste, therefore, is not a passive observer of social realities but an active participant in national renewal and value reorientation. Among the sensitive points that demand the attention of the committed African writer are the socio-economic conditions that threaten human wellbeing and dignity. Poverty, unemployment, inadequate healthcare, insecurity and the absence of other basic necessities continue to shape the experiences of many Africans, especially young people who are disproportionately affected by these challenges. Faced with limited opportunities and uncertain futures, many youths adopt various survival strategies, including migration to the Global North in search of better life prospects. These realities constitute critical social concerns that the socially committed writer cannot afford to ignore.

While migration in pursuit of better opportunities remains a legitimate and often desirable aspiration, some young people resort to irregular and perilous routes in their quests for survival. Others become entangled in illicit activities such as internet fraud and drug trafficking as alternative means of economic sustenance. These realities underscore the imperative for the literary artist to continue exposing the dangers and consequences of such survival strategies through creative engagement. Survival, therefore, emerges as a fundamental condition of human existence that simultaneously provokes protest against oppressive circumstances and affirms the enduring human quest for dignity and fulfillment. Echoing this perpective, Ohaeto (2014) argues that "the individual motivated to survive often protests against all forms of subjugation and oppression and in the process there is an affirmation for self-fulfilment and self-actualisation" (p.214). In contemporary Nigeria, the desire for a better life compels many young people to navigate profound identity tensions, often intensified by comparisons with peers perceived to possess superior economic opportunities and lifestyles. In the attempt to be like their more perceived successful peers, some adopt choices and survival strategies that complicate their moral, social, and personal development. Identity crises can precipitate choices with far-reaching and sometimes self-destructive consequences, affecting not only individuals but also their families and communities. Young people are particularly susceptible to such tensions owing to the ambitions, uncertainties, and exploratory impulses associated with youth. Consequently, limited confidence in existing socio-economic structures, coupled with the desire to transcend poverty and attain upward mobility, often intensifies the struggle for self-definition among many youths. These dynamics of identity negotiation and the attendant risks of self-destruction are vividly explored in Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream*.

Review of Relevant Literature

The phenomenon of migration has increasingly attracted the attention of Nigerian creative writers and literary critics, particularly in the twenty-first century, as economic uncertainty, insecurity, and global mobility continue to shape the experiences of young people. Feldner (2019) observes that contemporary Nigerian literature has witnessed the emergence of a "new African diaspora" narrative in which migration functions not merely as physical movement but as a complex negotiation, belonging, displacement, and the realities of postcolonial Nigeria. Examining the works of fictional writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila, Chris Abani, Chika Unigwe, and Sefi Atta, he argues that migration narratives interrogate the tension between the imagined promise of life abroad and the lived experiences of exclusion, nostalgia, and cultural dislocation.

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Similarly, Shittu (2021) contends that migration has become one of the defining thematic frontiers of contemporary Nigerian literature, with writers exploring its socio-political, cultural, and psychological implications for both migrants and their communities of origin. Focusing on Nigerian diasporic writing, he maintains that migration narratives expose the contradictions of transnational existence and question idealised perceptions of the West. Ajibola (2021) demonstrates that Nigerian migrant narratives increasingly foreground the migration gendered experiences of migration, revealing how female migrants negotiate exploitation, displacement, identity, and survival within foreign spaces. Likewise, Ezeonu (2023) argues that Nigerian migration literature consistently deconstructs the myth of the "greener pasture" by portraying the realities of racial discrimination, alienation, identity crisis, and cultural disorientation that frequently characterise migrants' lives. More recently, Usman (2024), in his reading of Adichie's *Americanah* and Jude Dibia's *Unbridled*, observe that Nigerian migration fiction juxtaposes expectations of prosperity abroad with the harsh realities of post-migration disillusionment, thereby exposing migration as a deeply ambivalent experience rather than an assured pathway to fulfiment. Within this growing body of migratory fiction, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* occupies a significant place. Nwanyanwu (2022) argues that the novel exemplifies the emergence of twenty-first century Nigerian migratory fiction by exposing the postcolonial conditions that drive trafficking, exile, and forced migration, while illustrating how migration often culminates in trauma, identity fragmentation, and psychological dislocation rather than fulfillment. Similarly, Nutsukpo (2019) maintains that *Trafficked* foregrounds the exploitation of vulnerable Nigerian women within transnational trafficking networks and underscores the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration as response to the enduring consequences of irregular migration and human trafficking.

Although migration has received greater critical attention in Nigerian fiction, contemporary Nigerian drama has likewise engaged questions on mobility, displacement, belonging, and transnational aspirations from diverse perspectives. Plays such as *The Foreigners* by Bode Sowande interrogate notions of identity, otherness, and social exclusion, while *Sweet Revenge* and *The Reign of Wazobia* by Tess Onwueme explore the socio-economic and political conditions that compel individuals to seek alternative spaces for dignity, security, and self-fulfilment. Theatrical productions such as "Iloya" by Segun LafUp Ogundipe respond explicitly to the contemporary "japa" phenomena by exposing the tensions between youthful aspirations and the realities of migration. Taken together, these dramatic works demonstrate that Nigerian theatre has increasingly become a site for interrogating mobility, displacement, and the socio-economic anxieties underpinning migration.

Recent scholarship has also begun to examine Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream*, attesting to the play's growing significance within contemporary Nigerian migration discourse. Although the body of criticism remains relatively small, the available studies underscore the play's relevance to debates on irregular migration, youth disillusionment, and the social responsibilities of literature. Ajileye, Duruaku, and Abah (2017) approach the play from the perspective of Theatre for Development, arguing that dramatic performance constitutes an effective instrument for combining migration-induced insecurity through public enlightenment, civic education, and behavioural reorientation. Their study foregrounds the transformative potential of theatre as a vehicle for social change and migration awareness but pays comparatively little attention to the

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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psycho-social motivations that propel the protagonist towards self-destructive choices. Adopting a literary critical approach, Fasasi and Inedu (2021) interpret *A Mirage for a Dream* as a powerful critique of the illusion of the proverbial greener pasture. They contend that Duruaku dismantles the romanticised perception of overseas migration by dramatising the gulf between youthful aspirations and the grim realities of irregular migration, including exploitation, deception, and death. Their analysis successfully demonstrates the play's warning against uncritical migration aspirations especially, the internal psychological conditions that precipitate it.

More recently, Akaenyi and Nnanna (2024) examine the play as an example of socially committed theatre capable of confronting contemporary migration challenges through moral instruction and public advocacy. They argue that Duruaku employs dramatic art to stimulate critical reflection on the dangers of irregular migration while encouraging attitudinal change among young people and the wider society. Their reading reinforces the enduring relevance of Nigerian drama as a medium of social intervention and collective consciousness, particularly in addressing pressing national concerns. Taken together, these studies have significantly advanced scholarly understanding of *A Mirage for a Dream*. Nevertheless, they converge largely on the play's didactic orientation, its advocacy against irregular migration, and its value as an instrument of migration awareness and social reformation. Comparatively little critical attention has been devoted to the intricate interplay between identity crisis, precarious aspirations, and self-destruction as the psychological architecture underpinning Chimdi's tragic decisions. Nor have existing studies sufficiently examined how familial pressure, social exclusion, economic precarity, and the quest for social validation collectively fracture youthful identity and precipitate irregular migration. It is within this critical gap that the present study is situated. By foregrounding identity crisis as the central psycho-social catalyst for irregular migration and self-destruction, this study extends existing scholarship beyond migration awareness to offer a more distinctive literary interpretation of Duruaku's dramatic imagination and its engagement with contemporary Nigerian realities. The present study also departs from existing scholarship by interrogating the intersection of identity crisis, irregular migration, and self-destruction through the complementary perspectives of Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory and Burke and Stets' Identity Theory. It argues that Chimdi's tragic fate is not solely the consequence of economic deprivation but also a fractured identity reinforced by social rejection, family pressure, and the quest for social recognition.

Theoretical and Analytical Background

This study is anchored on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, particularly the stage of Identity versus Role Confusion, while drawing complementary insights to Burke and Stets' Identity Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for examining the complex relationship between identity formation, social recognition, irregular migration, and self-destruction as represented in Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream*. Whereas Erikson explains the psychological processes through which identity develops or becomes destabilised, Burke and Stets illuminate the social interactions and structures that shape individual self-perception. Their integration therefore enables a holistic interrogation of both the internal and external forces that influence the actions of the play's characters. Erikson (1968) conceives identity as a coherent and relatively stable sense of self that develops through

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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continuous interaction between the individual and society. According to him, the stage of identity versus role confusion is a crucial phase during which individuals seek purpose, direction, and social acceptance. Successful negotiation of this stage results in confidence, commitment, and a stable self-concept, whereas failure often produces uncertainty, low self-esteem, confusion, and susceptibility to external pressures. Identity, therefore, is not merely a personal attribute but a psychosocial achievement shaped by family, education, peer relationships, and prevailing social values. When these influences become conflicting or unstable, individuals may experience identity crises characterised by frustration, insecurity, and an intensified search for validation through socially sanctioned measures of success.

Although Erikson's theory originated within developmental psychology, its explanatory value has extended to literary and cultural studies, where scholars employ it to examine the psychological dimensions of fictional characters and the social environments that shape them. Literature frequently represents characters negotiating competing values, social expectations, and personal aspirations, making identity one of its enduring thematic concerns. Consequently, Erikson's conception of identity crisis provides a valuable interpretive for analysing literary characters whose decisions emerge from tensions between self-perception and societal expectations. Rather than treating fictional characters as isolated individuals, the theory facilitates an understanding of how literary texts dramatise broader psychological and social realities through characterisation, conflict, and plot development. In *A Mirage for a Dream*, Chimdi's gradual progression from self-doubt to desperation exemplifies the psycho-social consequences of unresolved identity conflict within an environment marked by economic hardship, social ridicule, and the relentless pursuit of material success.

Complementing Erikson's formulation is Burke and Stets' (2009) Identity Theory, which explains identity as the meanings individuals attach to themselves through their social roles and interactions. The theory posits that identity is continually negotiated within society and sustained through recognition, validation, and acceptance by significant others. Individuals constantly compare how they are perceived in the society; where these perceptions become inconsistent, identity is threatened, often resulting in psychological distress and behavioural adjustment. Identity is therefore simultaneously personal and social, emerging from reciprocal relationship between self-understanding and external evaluation.

Burke and Stets' perspective is particularly relevant to *A Mirage for a Dream*, where Chimdi's identity is persistently undermined by the contempt directed at his occupation, educational background, and socio-economic status. Although he earns an honest living and demonstrates remarkable commitment to self-improvement, he is repeatedly ridiculed by commuters, relatives, and members of his extended family. Such experiences gradually erode his self-worth and reinforce his perception of inadequacy despite the genuine opportunities available to him through Mike's intervention. His eventual fascination with irregular migration is therefore not merely an economic response to poverty but an attempt to reconstruct an identity capable of attracting dignity, recognition, and social approval.

From a literary standpoint, the combined application of Erikson's Psychosocial Development and Burke and Stets' Identity Theory enables this study to move beyond a purely thematic reading of

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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A Mirage for a Dream to an interrogation of the psychological and social forces that shape characterisation, conflict, and dramatic action. The framework demonstrates that Duruaku's play is not simply a narrative about irregular migration but a profound exploration of fractured identity, social validation, and precarious aspirations among contemporary Nigerian youths. It therefore provides an appropriate analytical lens through which the intersection of literature, psychology, and society may be critically examined, while reinforcing the enduring capacity of literary texts to illuminate the human consequences of social realities.

Youth, Identity Crisis, and the Quest for Survival in Nigeria

Fearon (1999) conceives identity as the way individuals understand and define themselves in relation to others based on shared characteristics, social affiliations, and personal attributes. Building on this perspective, Vignoles et al. (2016) argue that identity is a dynamic construct shaped by cultural contexts, social interactions, and lived experiences rather than a fixed personal attribute. Similarly, McLean and Syed (2015) maintain that identity evolves through continuous engagement with changing life circumstances, relationships, and personal experiences, enabling individuals to sustain a coherent sense of self while adapting to new realities. Together, these perspectives underscore the fluid yet enduring nature of identity as both a personal and socially negotiated process.

Identity crisis on the other hand is a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense becomes insecure about heir identity due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Offering a more succinct explanation, Uwa et al. (2020) observe that "an identity crisis is when you either lose track of who you are or do not feel happy with who you are and want to change your life or restructure it" (p.3). While Erikson situates identity crisis within the broader developmental process of identity formation, Uwa et al.'s formulation highlights the feelings of dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and the desire for self-reinvention that often accompany such experiences. These tensions are particularly evident in youth, a developmental stage characterised by exploration, aspiration, and the pursuit of self-definition.

An individual going through an identity crisis may find themselves lost in thought with certain questions such as: What are my values? Who am I? What am I passionate about? What is my role in society or purpose in life? In Nigeria, the worrisome questions are not different, especially with the youths, most of whom have gone through the stress of the educational system in the country, and after years of struggles have nothing to show for it. Others who could not make it through the system of formal education and other privileges are also in the same dilemma. Feelings of uncertainty and social discontent often find expression in the language of everyday interactions among young Nigerians. Statements such as "Nigeria is finished" and "If you no get connect for dis country, your name na sorry" capture widespread perceptions of exclusion, hopelessness, and the desire to seek opportunities elsewhere. Notably, these expressions are frequently conveyed in Nigerian Pidgin, an English-based creole that functions as the country's unofficial lingua franca. A close look at the above statements and many more like them tells of a situation in which people are frustrated; hence, they are saddled with so many questions and statements. From all indications, though some of them sound funny, they are questions and statements from people in self-doubt; young people who question their originality

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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and sense of belonging in their society. The statements are a reflection of one passing through identity crisis.

Unfair considerations or lack of even distribution of resources has made young people in Nigeria to question their sense of belonging or place in the country; a situation where the government favours a certain region or ethnic nationalities to the unpleasant disadvantage of other region or regions. In such state of affairs and total lack of state's neutrality in addressing identity issues in the country's multi-ethnic and culturally heterogeneous people, young people become hopeless about their future. Ignatius Uche Nwankwo (2021) laments that "they are bothered that all yardsticks and resources of fair competition with youths from other zones in the country are heavily tilted to their disadvantage…lopsided distribution of resources and appointments by the state compound feelings among youth… of worthlessness, powerlessness and estrangement from mainstream socio-economic life of the nation" (p. 61).

Corroborating Nwankwo's assertions, Ogoh Alubo (2022) posits that:

> In the daily experiences, the classification of Nigerians into indigenes and settlers only indicates who is native to particular locality and who is not. It creates problems because the classification is a basis for citizenship rights, entitlements and access to opportunities. Nigerians' daily experiences are replete with tales of denial, exclusion and discrimination of some groups on the one hand, and access, inclusion and a sense of belonging by other groups on the other**.** (p. 5)

Alubo argues that institutional practices in Nigeria often privilege indigenes in Nigeria over non-indigenes in employment, education, and scholarship opportunities. He further notes that non-indigenes frequently face less favourable conditions, including higher tuition fees and limited access to public benefits, irrespective of their residency or tax contributions. Such discriminatory practices reinforce social exclusion and unequal access to opportunities.

The alleged brutality of the now-disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) during the 2020 #ENDSARS protests, marked by the harassment, torture, and extra-judicial killing of young Nigerians, brought renewed attention to the precarious realities confronting the nation's youth. Beyond exposing the vulnerabilities of young entrepreneurs and other citizens striving to earn a legitimate living, these experiences suggest the crisis of identity and belonging faced by many young Nigerians who increasingly perceive state institutions as sources of fear rather than protection. Such conditions often intensify feelings of alienation, uncertainty, and distrust, thereby complicating young people's pursuit of self-definition and social fulfillment.

Irregular Migration and the Nigerian Youths

For many young Nigerians, migration represents a significant pathway towards securing sustainable livelihoods and improving the wellbeing of both themselves and their families. Migration offers young Nigerians the opportunity to obtain productive and decent employment, improve socio-economic status, learn new skills, and increase human and financial capital. This perception reflects a broader global trend, as the Global Migration Group (2014) observes that youth migration is set to increase and that young migrants possess "tremendous potential for enhancing and sustaining development, productivity, and economic stability worldwide" (p.14). Most people migrate to join their families, get married or chase opportunities for their higher learning abroad. But are all the routes to migration legal? Are all the motives for migration right

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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ISSN:3121-7710

and fulfiled? Is the grass always greener on the other side? Irregular migration refers to the movement of persons outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2024). It may involve unauthorised border crossings, the use of forged travel documents, visa overstays, or the facilitation of movement through migrant smuggling networks. In response to increasingly restrictive immigration policies and enhanced border surveillance in many developed countries, irregular migrants often become vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and other risks associated with unsafe migration pathways. Among Nigerian youths, such pathways may include travelling through irregular routes to Europe, relying on unauthorised agents, or using falsified documents in pursuit of better life opportunities. These realities are further compounded in countries with weak rule of law, where militias or smugglers and traffickers act with impunity.

The prevalence of irregular migration among Nigerians has been linked to a range of socio-economic and security challenges, including unemployment, insecurity, inadequate healthcare, limited educational opportunities, and violence. Although most Nigerian migrants remain within the African continent, significant destinations beyond Africa include the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and countries within the European Union (Connor & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019). These migration patterns reflect the persistent search for safety, stability, and improved life prospects among many young Nigerians. Owing to geographical proximity, the Central Mediterranean route has remained one of the principal pathways through which many Nigerians attempt to reach Europe, particularly Italy. Although migration trips along this route have reduced in recent years due to stricter border controls and changing migration policies, the route continues to attract young migrants seeking improved life prospects. At the same time, it remains one of the world's deadliest migration corridors, exposing migrants to shipwrecks, exploitation, and other forms of abuse. Recent reports indicate that thousands of migrants continue to undertake the crossing annually despite the associated risks and increasing interceptions and returns in transit countries such as Libya (UNHCR,2024; IOM,2024).

Irregular migration often exposes migrants to severe risks and forms of exploitation, with women and girls frequently experiencing heightened vulnerability. Along migration routes, many are subjected to sexual and gender-based violence, human trafficking, forced labour, detention, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse, while others lose their lives through hazardous crossings and the absence of basic humanitarian assistance. Despite widespread awareness of these dangers, difficult socio-economic conditions and the perception of migration as a pathway to success continue to drive many young Nigerians to undertake such perilous journeys (Ikuteyijo, 2020). Consequently, the pursuit of improved life opportunities frequently unfolds within a precarious terrain where aspiration and self-preservation are in constant tension.

Precarious Aspirations and the Tragedy of Irregular Migration in Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream*

Published in 2016, Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream* is situated within the tradition of socially committed Nigerian literature, where creative expression functions as a medium for interrogating pressing societal realities and inspiring critical reflection. Set in a Nigerian village courtyard, the play narrates the tragic story of Chimdi, an ambitious primary school dropout whose impatience

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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ISSN:3121-7710

with the slow pace of socio-economic advancement leaves him captivated by the promise of greener pasture abroad. Seduced by popular fantasies of Europe as a land of limitless opportunities, lucrative blue-collar jobs, and stronger currencies, Chimdi embarks on the hazardous trans-Saharan route after failing to secure legitimate travel documents. His dream, however, ends in horror as he falls victim to organ harvesters who brutally take his life and rip out his kidneys.

Through Chimdi's tragic trajectory, Duruaku interrogates the culture of uncritical migration aspirations fuelled by social competition, misinformation, economic frustration, and the desire for rapid upward mobility. In doing so, the playwright exposes how fractured identity, societal pressure, and unrealistic aspirations can culminate in irregular migration and ultimately self-destruction. The play equally exposes other social pathologies, including widow abuse and the inadequacies of the socio-economic structure that compels citizens to seek fulfillment elsewhere. Written in nine episodes and structured through eight transitions, with pre-set and post-set actions, *A Mirage for a Dream* is both a cautionary tale and a profound commentary on the precarious aspirations that shape the experience of many contemporary Nigerian youths.

The play opens at a bustling motor park where Chimdi and other touts struggle daily for survival, loudly wooing passengers travelling to destinations such as Aba, Umuahia, Lagos, Onitsha, and Port Harcourt in their characteristic styles. This opening scene not only establishes the socio-economic realities that define the protagonist's world but also foreshadows the desperation, ambition, and tragic choices that drive the dramatic action.

> **Chimdi**: Aba! Aba! Aba! Aba here! One chances. One chances ---- one one chances. Aba by bus. We don dey commot (*lowers voice*). *Nne*, come now, you no wan go Aba? Okay o (*shouts*). One chances for Aba. Aba! Aba! Aba! (*calls a hawker*) Hey Banana girl. Give me banana. (p.4)

Chimdi's first appearance presents him as an industrious, jovial, and resourceful young man who takes pride in his work. Adept at navigating the challenges of the motor park, he responds swiftly to unfolding situations and skillfully deploys humour and persuasion to win over commuters. Despite the banter, abrasiveness, and opportunism often associated with the profession, Chimdi initially emerges as a committed individual determined to earn an honest living and appears to command a measure of popularity within his environment. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he remains mindful of his responsibilities as a husband to his expectant wife and resents any attempt to undermine that role. His exchange with a female passenger who interrupts his bargaining with a banana hawker further reinforces these aspects of his character.

> **Woman**: Butyou haven't paid.
> **Chimdi**: So what? I never commot from here.
> **Woman**: Don't be rude, young man.
> **Chimdi**: Me; young man! Na your husband you dey abuse. (p.6)

The female passenger attempts to bargain for the same bunch of bananas Chimdi is negotiating to buy, an action he interprets as an intrusion and a slight on his person. From his perspective, she would probably not have behaved in such a manner towards someone she considered socially refined or economically respectable. Unwilling to be outmanoeuvred or intimidated within the bounds of his rights, Chimdi responds sharply, insisting on the respect due to him not only as an

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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ISSN:3121-7710

individual but also as a husband with responsibilities, irrespective of his appearance or occupation.

Ironically, Chimdi earns his livelihood through a profession widely stigmatised in Nigerian society. Motor-park touts or *agberos* are often perceived as social misfits and are consequently treated with disdain and little regard. Such experiences of social devaluation have implications for identity formation, particularly among young people whose sense of self is often shaped by societal recognition and acceptance. As Erikson (1968) observes, identity becomes precarious when individuals struggle to reconcile their self-perception with the meanings imposed on them by others. Chimdi's repeated attempts to defend his worth therefore reveal not merely some personal indignation but an ongoing struggle for dignity, validation, and a coherent sense of self. Unsurprisingly, almost every character he encounters at this stage belittles him, although he seldom hesitates to retaliate. For example:

> **Chimdi**: I dey come. Make I collect my change.
> **Girl**: Which change (*walking away*) E be like say you dey look for trouble. I don commot from here, bo. (*mutters*) You no get money, you deybuy banana… (p.6).
> **Man II**: Listen. I'II go to another bus if you're too lazy to do your work. What is wrong with you?
> **Chimdi**: Oga! No abuse me o. You no wan make I collect my change? … (p.6).
> **Lady**: (cuts in) You won't go and get a job! Idiot. (*walks away*)
> **Chimdi**: Chai! I don chop shit. Look me o. Ordinary girl dey talk to me like this (p.8).

The foregoing encounters illustrate how societal attitudes and everyday interactions can precipitate identity crisis. As earlier noted, individuals experiencing identity conflict often question their worth, social relevance, and place within the community. For Chimdi, the contradiction is particularly striking: despite choosing honest labour over criminality and striving to provide for his family, he is repeatedly dismissed and told to "go and get a job," as though his efforts and humanity carry little value.

Ironically, the very motor-park that symbolises Chimdi's humiliation also becomes the site of an unexpected reunion. Man II, who had earlier engaged him in a heated exchange, is later revealed to be Mike, his former primary school classmate. The encounter evokes mixed emotions, as Mike struggles to reconcile the memory of a brilliant schoolmate with the reality of Chimdi's present circumstances. The reunion between Chimdi and Mike, twenty-two years after their primary school days, provides further insight into the social and personal circumstances that shape Chimdi's tragic trajectory. Recounting his ordeal, Chimdi reveals that he once enjoyed a privileged childhood. As the only child of his mother in a wealthy polygamous household, he was known for his generosity, often buying sweets and other treats for his classmates. However, the death of his affluent father altered the course of his life. Exploiting his mother's position as the youngest of the three wives, the older wives and their children dispossessed them of their inheritance and forced them out of the family home. Faced with harsh economic realities, Chimdi combined schooling with working as a driver's assistant before eventually abandoning his education to concentrate on earning a living.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

As adversity mounted, Chimdi drifted into an unstable domestic life. Married to a beautiful woman, he increasingly channels his frustrations into violence, subjecting her to physical abuse. His sister-in-law, Egondu, repeatedly attributes this conduct to the frustrations and social stigma associated with Chimdi's occupation. In contrast, Mike has emerged as a successful lawyer and owner of a thriving law firm. He has also ventured into politics and intends to contest for a seat in the State House of Assembly under the platform of the People's Movement Front (PMF). Disillusioned by years of unfulfilled promises, Chimdi remains sceptical about politics and distrustful of government institutions. Mike, however, encourages him to participate in the electoral process and reassures him of his enduring friendship by urging him to remain in contact.

> **Mike:** (*They move out*) Chimdi, be in touch. When I get into the House of Assembly, come and see me at my law. 15 Onitsha Road. We must do something about your condition.
> **Chimdi**: Okay, Mike. You go win the election. We go dey pray for you.
> **Mike**: (leaving for his bus) And vote for me! (p.13)

As anticipated, Mike secures victory in the State House of Assembly election. When Chimdi visits him thereafter, he is met with disdain by the secretary and cleaner, whose dismissive attitudes are shaped by his shabby appearance and apparent illiteracy. It is only through the intervention of Mike's personal assistant, Charlie, that he gains access to his old friend. Confronted with the reality of Chimdi's inability to read or write, Mike is both saddened and troubled, recognising that these limitations may constrain the extent to which he can assist him.

> **Mike**: The problem is your lack of good education. No training in any good trade either. Ocho passenger. That's not a job, is it? After I saw you at the motor park that day, I couldn't eat when I got home. I said: How can Chimdi, the Brilliant Chimdi, who used to even help me with my home-work become a nobody. I nearly wept. You could have learned a trade or finished primary six, at least. (p.14)

Chimdi acknowledges the transformative value of education and expresses deep regret that his formal schooling ended at Primary Five. Moved by his friend's predicament, Mike offers him a fresh start by purchasing a taxi for him to operate, with the intention of eventually transferring ownership to him outright. The offer, however, is contingent upon Chimdi acquiring basic literacy skills. Elated by the twin prospects of returning to school and becoming a vehicle owner, Chimdi responds with profound gratitude, while Mike pledges to support his educational advancement.

> **Chimdi**: Ahh Mike. This is too much o.
> **Chimd**i: I promise. This na chance to better my life. Ahh! My wife go jolly well well (shakes hands) (p.27).

Mike introduces Chimdi to his personal assistant, Charlie, instructing him to cultivate a close relationship with Chimdi and maintain regular contact with him. Determined to alter the course of his friend's life, Mike expresses his intention to transform him into "a new man" within a year. Over the following months, Chimdi demonstrates remarkable commitment to his studies, earning the admiration of his wife, who acknowledges his diligence, enthusiasm, and renewed sense of purpose.

> **Berna**: (leaving) That's one thing with you. You overdo everything: overwork, overplay, overeat, over think! Ah Ah.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

> **Chimdi**: You people dragged me into this school thing: (*mimics*) "Get education, pass primary 6, get First School Leaving Certificate…" I turn left, you are at my neck, I turn right, Charlie tackles me; I look up, Honourable and his taxi challenge is facing me. You are supposed to be supporting me, you know (p.28).

A week before Chimdi's final examinations, Mike fulfils his promise by purchasing a vehicle for him through his personal assistant, Charlie. Charlie conveys the news and asks Chimdi to collect the car the following week. He also intimates that there is little financial reward operating a taxi service and hints at his intention to pursue more lucrative opportunities elsewhere.

> **Charlie**: There's not much profit from taxi. You must think ahead. Even me, I'II move on. (*Chimdi raises eyebrows*) You don't watch the performing masquerade from one location in the arena. The taxi will not give you more money than *ocho passenger*. It will give you respectability, not money. That's what I've been telling yo. I'm making plans to move on with my life (p.31).

Egondu visits her sister, Berna, in her newly acquired car and seizes the opportunity to boast about her affluent husband while ridiculing Chimdi for his perceived inability to fulfil societal expectations of male success and provision. In response, Berna offers a more sympathetic perspective, drawing attention to the immense pressures Chimdi faces and the difficult circumstances under which he strives to improve their condition.

> **Berna**: You people are putting him under too much pressure, and I don't like it: rich half-brothers who cornered their father's wealth, childhood friends who have made good, boastful in-laws. We will get there by God's grace. As you can see, he's improving (p.33).

Egondu remains unimpressed by Chimdi's new status as a cab driver. Ironically, she laments the scourge of unemployment, youthful impatience, and the desperation to attain wealth at all costs. She recounts the tragic fate of Ekene, an only son who, despite studying Political Science and completing the compulsory NYSC scheme, could not secure a meaningful employment.

> **Egondu**: No job oo. No money, poor parents. You know now. He has four sisters in the university at the same time; reading various courses no one is sure will fetch any job. And self- employment isn't easy. You need talent, you need motivation, you need security, you need money… (p.36).

Egondu sheds light on the grim realities confronting many Nigerian youths, particularly the tendency to undertake perilous journeys through the Sahara with little understanding of the dangers involved. Ironically, despite her awareness of these challenges, she continues to deny Chimdi the patience and encouragement his circumstances demand. Her account of the events leading to Ekene's untimely death is at once tragic and revealing, exposing the contradictions that often characterise society's response to youthful aspirations and frustrations. "…to North Africa. I'm sure he was ready to go anywhere for green pasture. Except that this particular pasture wasn't green. It was brown, sandy, and apparently not fully informed on the challenges of crossing the desert" (p.36) .Ekene's body was later discovered with some of its parts missing, a gruesome reality that compounded the anguish of his already impoverished parents and left them devastated by the tragic loss of their only son.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Two years after, Charlie returns from Spain. Chimdi is marveled at his sudden and quick transformation. Charlie explains "About two years ago. I saw an opportunity and skipped. That two-kobo job for Honourable was not the best. In life, you take your opportunities. I'm glad I seized mine. I took a leap of faith and travelled out. If I was making *anya ura*, mmh…" (p.40). He explains how Ginger, her girlfriend assisted him through her brother to emigrate. He could not give a clear account of the kind of business that gave him so much money but based it on "importation of toothpicks" (p.42). Chimdi desires to travel after Charlie has told him some 'sweet-nothings', and he pesters Charlie to assist him when the latter had informed him that he made more than 150,000 Euros (45 million naira by Chimdi's calculations).

Charlie tells Chimdi that with his level of education, travelling visa will be impossible and tells him how he travelled.

> **Charlie:** Not that. I went through Morocco, then I was smuggled across the Mediterranean at Gilbrata, on a boat for 15 kilometres that felt like 100. Terrible risk, but I made it. Holed up in Malaga for two months, then got a job in the vineyards of Andalucia. I worked in a wine factory for one year. Slave labour, but good Euros. Then I went to Palermo, Italy when something more profitable came up. I was there for six terrible months, then bolted when the Carabinieri came after some of us. I lived dangerously in Italy, but I made my money (p.43).

Chimdi becomes captivated by the prospect of making millions abroad and, like Charlie, comes to believe that his destiny lies in Europe. Dismissing taxi driving as unprofitable, he shows his wife the migration routes on a map, convinced that the journey is straightforward. Despite her pleas, he remains resolute, willing to risk everything to "join the millionaires." He even regards the two years spent under Mike's guidance as wasted time and urges his wife to remain hopeful about the future.

> **Chimdi**: I won't be alone. Others have gone and come back rich. They also have wives.
> **Berna**: (*resigned*) This thing is a mirage. A walk into the deep night. I can feel it in my bones. I therefore wash my hands clean of it (p.48).

Determined to pursue his European dream, Chimdi deceives Berna into obtaining two hundred thousand naira from her elder sister, Egondu, under the pretext of establishing a business for his wife. When Berna confronts him, he refuses to yield to further approbation. Convinced that the overland route to Europe offers a quick path to prosperity, his resolve remains unshaken. He subsequently meets Charlie, Obinali, and Ginger, who hastily arrange his travel plans and provide only sketchy details of the journey. Informed that he would travel alongside twelve others, including two women, Chimdi pays seven hundred thousand naira for the processing of his documents and is assured that everything would be ready within a week.

Chimdi's death elicits grief and remorse from all who had, in one way or another, shaped the journey, including Ginger, Obinali, Egondu, Charlie, and Mike. In particular, Ginger reflects on the harsh realities of irregular migration, describing the overland route to Europe as a perilous undertaking that often degenerates into a nightmare for those who embark on it. "Heat, exhaustion, road accident, dehydration… wrong timing, laxity on the path of the route managers…" (p.65). On the missing body parts, Obinali explains:

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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> There's a huge demand for certain human parts in the Asia. They can't get enough donors or accident victims with undamaged organs, so they force the matter. Their agents ambush vulnerable desert crossers and rip off their organs, especially the kidneys. It's a syndicated business… (p.67)

As further revelations emerge, accusations and counter-accusations ensue, with all those implicated in Chimdi's travel arrangements, including Egondu, seeking to absolve themselves of blame. Amid the rising tensions, Mike attempts to restore order and perspective. Plans are subsequently made to visit Berna, Chimdi's young widow, and to travel to the village to participate in his funeral rites.

Conclusion

Toni Duruaku's *A Mirage for a Dream* offers a compelling interrogation of the precarious realities confronting many young Nigerians whose aspirations for a better life are shaped by socio-economic hardship, social competition, and the desire for recognition. Through the tragic experiences of Ekene, and more significantly, Chimdi, the play demonstrates how identity crisis, when compounded by impatience and misinformation, can culminate in self-destruction. Chimdi's fate is particularly poignant because, at the threshold of personal transformation, he abandons the opportunities made possible through Mike's intervention in pursuit of an uncertain promise of prosperity abroad. In this regard, he emerges as a symbolic representation of many African youths whose search for dignity, fulfillment, and social validation propels them towards dangerous migration pathways.

While the play acknowledges the role of structural deficiencies such as unemployment, economic insecurity, and inadequate social support in fuelling migration aspirations, it equally critiques the culture of instant gratification, materialism, and unhealthy social comparison that drives some young people to undermine legitimate opportunities in favour of imagined success elsewhere. It further exposes the subtle pressures exerted by family and society in shaping youthful decisions. Ultimately, *A Mirage for a Dream* functions as both a cautionary dramatic tale and a social commentary, urging young people to be patient and have informed judgement, and resilience in navigating adversity. Duruaku's drama thus serves as a timely reminder that the pursuit of aspiration, when divorced from critical reflection and realistic appraisal, may transform the promise of a dream into the tragedy of a mirage.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
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