

X-RAYING THE REPRESENTATION OF MIGRATION IN SELECTED NIGERIAN FILMS AND PLAYS

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1.ABSTRACT

Migration as an age-old phenomenon has continued to attract studies. This article contends that representation of migration in the genres of drama and film from an Afro-centric perspective still has a lot of unexamined dimensions. The research explores how playwrights and directors, through plays and films, represent migration and the implications: it re-frames migration beyond Western narratives, brings to the fore, the hosts/destination entities' narratives beyond the traditional single story. The qualitative research method is adopted for its appropriateness to provide in-depth insights, helping to pry into the complex ways migration is depicted, with impacts on public perception, policymaking and so on. The study's case studies are Ahmed Yerima's *Dami's Cross*, Oladipo Agboluaje's *Early Morning*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: the King's Horseman*, Akin Omotosho's *Rise*, and Ishaya Bako's *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel*. The findings provide: an understanding of how migration is depicted; reveal migration as a complex, multi-dimensional theme phenomenon, shaped by socio-economic factors and cultural tensions. The media wield power to shape public perception and influence policy if it highlights the human aspects of migration, encourages empathy, and urges policymakers to act. While both films and plays offer compelling portrayals, they each bring unique strengths to the narrative, contributing to a deeper discourse on migration. On styles, the findings reveal the narrative techniques used, socio-economic factors driving migration, the impact of these representations on public perception, migration policy, and so on. The key significance lies in its multidisciplinary approach, combining migration studies with media analysis to offer an understanding of migration as depicted in films and plays. The article contributes new insights into how media narratives shape and reflect socio-economic realities, enriching the field of migration studies with a cultural and artistic perspective, with a particular focus on African narratives.

Keywords: Representation, Migration, Reframing, Genres, Narratives, Multidisciplinary

2.INTRODUCTION

Migration, a phenomenon deeply rooted in human history, transcends the mere act of physical relocation to encompass a kaleidoscope of socio-economic, political, and cultural ramifications for both migrants and host communities. In its multifaceted nature, migration emerges as a response to several human and societal issues such as economic disparities, political instability, environmental pressures, and the universal quest for self-actualization. Yet, as migrants traverse borders—whether geographic, cultural, or psychological—they not only carry with them aspirations and memories but also confront the inherent complexities of integration, displacement, and identity reformation. The multiplicity of migration, marked by its potential for renewal and its attendant challenges, has rendered it a compelling subject for artistic and literary exploration. Interestingly, the artist is one person who treats migration beyond the exclusivity of people, he recognizes other entities and, or factors that patently shape different dimensions of the subject.

By x-raying the Nigerian artists' representation of migration in selected films and plays, this article deftly captures the issues of migration beyond the surface. Plays and films serve as potent vehicles for interrogating the intricate dynamics of migration, offering a more rounded portrayal that transcend individual experiences to encompass the

broadier implications for host societies. In Nigerian dramatic literature and cinema, migration is portrayed not just as a movement between spaces but as a negotiation of identities, power dynamics, cultural intersections, etc. The host communities, often framed as either enablers or antagonists in migration narratives, play a pivotal role in shaping the migrant experience. Through their response ranging from inclusion and empathy to exclusion and hostility—they influence the degree to which migrants can integrate or thrive.

Migration, a phenomenon that has shaped human history, remains a critical subject of scholarly inquiry due to its profound socio-economic, political, and cultural implications. Despite its prevalence and importance, the representation of migration in literature and film is often characterized by selective portrayals that either romanticize the migrant experience or focus disproportionately on its challenges. This selective representation risks oversimplifying the complexities of migration, including the indisputable interactions between migrants and host communities, the socio-political structures that influence migration, and the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement suffered either by a host or the migrant.

Before now, migrants are defined as those who moved elsewhere in search of jobs, if this statement is viewed within the prism of Abraham Maslow's classification of needs, popularized as Hierarchy of Needs, it would suffice to say that migrants are people within the first two rungs of the ladder. Here are Maslow's classifications:

1. Biological and physiological needs – air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep, etc.
2. Safety needs – protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear.
3. Love and belongingness needs – friendship, intimacy, trust, and acceptance, receiving and giving affection and love. Affiliating, being part of a group (family, friends, work).
4. Esteem needs – which Maslow classified into two categories: (i) esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and (ii) the need to be accepted and valued by others (e.g., status, prestige).
5. Cognitive needs – knowledge and understanding, curiosity, exploration, need for meaning and predictability. Cognitive needs drive our pursuit of knowledge and understanding. For instance, a student's desire to understand complex mathematical theories, a traveler's curiosity about diverse cultures, or an individual's quest for life's deeper meanings all exemplify these needs. Meeting these needs facilitates personal growth, comprehension, and a deeper understanding of life and its complexities.

Of course, a good number of artists routinely occupy the fifth class by the roles they play in most societies. A cursory look at the data of modern-day migrants totally renders the definition of the word migrant as contained in the dictionaries, obsolete, or expands it to include those who move out of their country for any of Maslow's classified needs. If the latter stands reasonably right, it then challenges a norm where a professor from a sub-Saharan African country is called a migrant for relocating to the United State while an American artisan who works in an oil drilling factory in Nigeria's Niger Delta is identified and addressed differently, as an expatriate.

For this study, if one examines Mr. Perkins in Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: the King's Horseman* as a migrant, perhaps, the narrative the director has embedded would help in the reappraisal of themes as this work attempts. Migration in the 21st century involves everyone across Maslow's hierarchy; like Prince Harry of the British Royal family migrating to the United States of America, or President Paul Biya who lives in France and governs his country from there.

Migration is captured by artists as being beyond a search for work but a venture to meet all of human aspirations, affecting others, hosts, and not fitting into a single story. Migration, affected by globalization and expanded by several other factors, is captured in works of arts. That said, the earliest history of humans is inseparable from migration. Benedetta Rossi asserts that:

It is very likely that all human beings descend from Africans. Although the study of the evolution of humans as a species is constantly developing, and new findings could yield unexpected results, the "out of Africa" hypothesis is the most creditable one. It argues that the earliest lineages of hominids sprang from Africa and that ancestors who developed in Africa eventually supplanted variants of the species that had evolved in Europe and Eastern Asia. According to Ian Tattersall "in Africa our lineage was born, and ever since its hominids were first emancipated from the forest edges, that continent has pumped out successive waves of emigrants to all parts of the Old World. "At the dawn of the existence of genus *homo*, the first ancestors from whom contemporary societies

derive are thought to have first evolved in East Africa 1.8 to 2.5 million years ago from an earlier genus called *Australopithecus*. One way of narrating human history is as a chain of migrations within and outside the African continent. (668).

While it is interesting to note that migration is dynamic to the extent of being studied under sociology, anthropology, psychology, theatre and film like in this case, etc., it is interesting to state that the renowned evolutionist, Charles Darwin is celebrated by scholars as his work is believed to captured and maximally infused migration at the core of his epochal work. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution had three main components: that variation occurred inexplicably and randomly among members of any species; that an individual's traits could be inherited by its progeny in proportions; and that the struggle for continuous existence which often drives migration, would allow only those with favorable traits to survive.

The episode in Nigerian history that is inferred in Ahmed Yerima's *Dami's Cross* captured the consequences of Nigeria's decision to move the Federal Capital Territory from Lagos to Abuja and the consequential 'displacement' of the Gwari natives of the land now known as Abuja. As is firmly established, artists interrogate issues that affect their environments specifically, and humanity in general. This is well documented by the following scholars: Tracie Utoh,

Nigerian playwrights have remained committed to the cause of social reforms. They use their plays as avenues to give exposition to the experiences, values and worldview of the Nigerian people. Through these expositions, the playwrights strive to achieve the social, political, cultural and moral purification, which has consistently eluded the nation. (133)

Saint Gbilekaa, "theatre aims at influencing peoples' consciousness and attitudes. Nigerian playwrights, aware of predominant social issues of contemporary concern, continue to tackle sensitive issues of national interest" (2). According to I. Hagher "all plays bear the imprints of environment and period in which they are created while also carrying the identifiable fingerprints of the playwright's social visions, beliefs and attitude to life" (2)

The artists' efforts at addressing issues have no omission, every aspect worth treating is promptly embraced, hence the interest in migration. If migration is an essential coping mechanism for humans, whether responding to threats or gravitating towards pleasure, it is often wrapped in the box.

Historically, migration patterns have been influenced by a range of factors, including wars, persecution, economic disparity, political instability, environmental challenges, and social dynamics. In the contemporary context, mixed factors remain one of the most potent drivers of migration, with individuals and families seeking living wages, improved living standards, employment opportunities, fulfillment, and enhanced prospects for their future generations at the face of real or assumed threats. However, the issue of migration is far beyond a single story, it is diverse, complex and intricately too broad to be streamlined into a single-story narrative. By a single story, this research adopts Chimamanda Adichie's description and thought thus:

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become. It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. ...stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Stories of migration have largely been told as a single story despite genuine efforts not to. And by single story, this work classifies both the positive and negative experiences of migrants as one; differing in the inclusion of the following: the hosts' experiences which centralize both migrant and hosts, among others. The single story is told from multiple places as though it changes the narrative.

Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, presents a unique case study for examining migration. The nation has experienced significant internal and international migration flows, driven by its complex socio-economic landscape. Understanding the pattern of migration in Nigeria requires an examination of several subtle, yet relevant shades vis: its historical context, socio-economic conditions, and the broader global migration trends that influence it. This is because Nigeria's history of migration can be traced as far back to the pre-colonial times when various ethnic groups engaged in trade, cultural exchanges, and occasional conflicts, leading to movements across regions. The colonial era introduced new dynamics, as the British colonial administration implemented policies that reshaped traditional migration patterns. Labor migration was particularly pronounced during this period, with many Nigerians moving to urban centers and other colonies to work predominantly as clerks or junior civil servants while majority of the uneducated worked in mines, plantations, and construction projects.

Post-Independence, Nigeria's migration patterns continued to evolve. The oil boom of the 1970s brought significant economic prosperity, attracting migrants from neighboring countries and fostering internal migration towards urban centers like Lagos, Port Harcourt, and later, Abuja. However, this period of economic growth was followed by economic downturns occasioned by the Biafran genocide, euphemistically tagged a civil war by the Nigerian government, and a dip in oil prices in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to increased emigration as Nigerians sought opportunities abroad. Today, migration in Nigeria is shaped by a combination of push and pull factors, and other very latent, yet powerful elements. High unemployment rates especially among the youths, poverty, poor and inadequate infrastructure, and hostile political environment are significant push factors that compel Nigerians to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Yet, migration goes deeper than those statistics and artists capture that.

The representation of migration in Nigerian media is not merely for entertainment; it serves as a critical commentary on the socio-economic conditions driving migration as well as its very many dimensions. Films and plays offer narratives that resonate with audiences, providing both a reflection of reality and a means to criticize and influence societal issues. By examining these representations, we can gain insights into the socio-economic factors influencing migration and the broader implications for Nigerian society.

Empirical evidence shows that media representations of migration influence public perception and discourse. Films and plays have the power to shape societal attitudes towards migrants, both within Nigeria and in the Diaspora. Understanding how migration is portrayed in the media can inform efforts to address misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices associated with migration. Furthermore, this article contributes to the broader field of migration studies by incorporating cultural and artistic perspectives.

3.RELATED WORKS

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and policy regarding migration. The narratives presented in films and plays can influence societal attitudes, inform policy debates, and even inspire advocacy and activism. By highlighting the experiences of migrants, media can humanize the issue of migration, fostering empathy and understanding among audiences.

Migration narratives have been explored across various disciplines and media, including literature, theatre, and film. These narratives capture the complex realities of economic, social, political, and cultural dynamics surrounding migration. One major work on the subject is Ebekue, Onyekachukwu's where he admitted his single focus when he posits that his work:

...has engaged in an in depth analysis of the concept of migration in Nigeria and Nollywood's diverse approaches to the representations of migration and migrant experiences. A close reading of migration and migrant experiences as represented in Nollywood feature and documentary films shows that the two film forms have disparate perspectives to their representation of issues of migration and migrant experiences. A major take home from the analysis is the monotonic representation of migration in a seductive and romantic manner. In effect, the researcher observed that the feature films under study narrated migrant experiences from in a way that foreshadows migration as a quick patch to the socio-economic maladies that afflict the teeming populace in Nigeria. Considering empirical data on the issue of migration especially as it concerns Nigeria, the representation can be said to be mostly illusive and highly misleading. The documentary films on the other hand were direct and unequivocally blunt with their representations of the migration and migrant experiences. The documentaries through direct

engagements with migrants in their respective places of settlement gave voice to the many horrors that characterize migrant experiences in both Europe, Africa and the transit paths. The representations directly contrast the narrative in the feature and shows migration, especially the irregular migration as a quicker path to depression, dejection and sometimes death. (122).

Ebekue's work like that of others, dwell largely on the migrants' experiences, leaving the hosts out, ignoring the other vital depictions as ingeniously crafted by artists. Within this field, the roles of playwrights, directors, and host communities are critical in framing and presenting migration stories, offering insights into human experiences, and shaping audience perceptions.

This review engages critically with existing theoretical approaches to migration, drawing on published scholarships to identify the ways in which these frameworks illuminate and complicate our understanding of migration as represented in creative works. Clare Finburgh Delijani's works,

accounts for a significant and growing strain of theatre that stages the central role played by migration and transnational, mobile identities not just in France but also across the world. Today around 30 per cent of France's population comprises either migrants from its former colonies or their post migrant descendants, demonstrating the key significance of migration to French society and culture. Using Édouard Glissant's notion of 'relation identity', which expresses 'the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures', Finburgh Delijani demonstrates how the exiles, immigrants and refugees featuring in the plays she examines represent the postcolonial diversity of the French nation. (368).

With close analysis, there is evidence that Finburgh Delijani exposes how characters illustrate the uprooting of belonging, legitimacy and identity by the often-violent severance of migration and exile. However, the trauma that characters suffer – which cannot be underestimated – is counterbalanced by the relational, transnational and cosmopolitan citizens they are able to become.

One of the earliest and most influential theories in migration studies is Ravenstein's Laws of Migration, which sought to identify general patterns of human mobility. Ravenstein's work emphasized economic motivations for migration, proposing that individuals move primarily in response to opportunities for better wages, employment, or living conditions and he highlights the following:

Most migration is over short distances; migration occurs in steps; long range migrants usually move to urban areas; each migration produces a movement in the opposite direction, although not necessarily in the same volume; rural dwellers are more migratory than urban dwellers; within their own country females are more migratory than males, but males are more migratory over long distances; most migrants are adults; large towns grow more by migration than by natural increase; migration increases with economic development (Ernst Georg Ravenstein, 54)

While his focus on economic factors has shaped subsequent theories, it has been critiqued for oversimplifying the complexities of migration by neglecting non-economic factors such as cultural, social, and political influences. In the context of literature and film, Ravenstein's economic determinism is reflected in works that highlight the economic disparities driving migration, such as Akin Omotosho's *Rise*, which explores the struggles of Nigerian migrants seeking better opportunities abroad. However, as scholars like Castles and Miller argue, economic motivation alone cannot account for the full range of migratory experiences, necessitating more comprehensive frameworks.

The push-pull theory, developed in the mid-20th century, builds on Ravenstein's insights by examining the interplay of factors that compel individuals to leave their place of origin (push factors) and those that attract them to a destination (pull factors). Lee's refinement of this theory introduced the concept of intervening obstacles, such as policy restrictions or geographical barriers, which mediate migration flows.

This framework has been widely applied in studies of migration representation, particularly in examining the structural inequalities and opportunities that shape migratory decisions. For instance, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* indirectly explores push-pull dynamics through its depiction of displacement and the search for refuge within a mythological context. While the push-pull theory remains influential, its reliance on dichotomous categories has been

critiqued for failing to capture the fluidity and multidimensionality of migration experiences, especially in contemporary contexts where transnationalism and globalization complicate traditional binaries.

Transnationalism, a more recent theoretical development, offers a dynamic perspective on migration by emphasizing the interconnectedness of migrants' lives across multiple national contexts. Scholars such as Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc argue that migrants maintain ties to their countries of origin while simultaneously integrating into host societies, creating transnational social spaces that transcend geographic boundaries. This perspective has significant implications for the study of migration in literature and film, as it highlights the hybrid identities and cultural negotiations that characterize migrant experiences.

4.METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative research methodology, with a focus on textual and film analysis, to conduct an examination of migration in selected African plays and film. The research method is rooted in analytical, interpretive and critical approaches, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the themes, narrative structures, and artistic techniques used to depict migration. By engaging with six case studies – Ahmed Yerima's *Dami's Cross*, Oladipo Agboluaje's *Early Morning*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: the King's Horseman*, Akin Omotosho's *Rise*, and Ishaya Bako's *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel*. This analyzes the ways in which migration is conceptualized and represented across different genres. An in-depth critical and analytical approach is adopted in our attempt to x-ray the complexities and nuances of migration and its representation across genres.

5.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ahmed Yerima's *Dami's Cross* pry into the psychological and moral burdens borne by migrants' hosts, often emphasizing the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations. In *Early Morning* by Oladipo Agboluaje, migration's impact on the host society is explored primarily through the lens of Mike, the only British character in the play. Mike, a working-class man in his late thirties, represents a section of the host population struggling to adapt to the changes brought about by migration. His interactions with the Nigerian characters—Ojo, Mama Paul, and Kola—reflect both the tensions and interdependencies that define the relationship between migrants and their host communities.

Similarly, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* allegorizes the displacement inherent in migration, underscoring the alienation and conflicts that arise when individuals navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes in pursuit of their interests. In film, Akin Omotosho's *Rise* and Ishaya Bako's *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* explore themes of aspiration, resilience, and cultural hybridity, highlighting how migrants both challenge and are shaped by the socio-economic frameworks of their host environments.

Biyi Bandele's cinematic adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* further complicates this discourse by examining the existential ruptures wrought by cultural displacement within colonial and postcolonial contexts. Yerima's *Dami's Cross*, for instance, vividly captures the friction between traditionalist host societies and migrants whose experiences and ambitions are shaped by global influences.

Films like *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* explore the subtle negotiations of belonging and identity as migrants strive to reconcile their individual aspirations with the cultural expectations of their new environments. Meanwhile, *Rise* articulates the transformative potential of diasporic experiences, underscoring how migrants, through resilience and adaptability, redefine themselves and contribute to the evolution of their host societies.

6.FINDINGS

1. Thematic Representation of Migration. Migration is depicted as a multifaceted experience, encompassing themes of economic hardship, identity crisis, exile, ambition, return migration, and cultural conflict. The selected plays and films frame migration through historical, socio-economic, and personal lenses, showing how internal and international migration affect individuals and societies. While *The Gods Are Not to Blame* presents migration as a predestined exile, *Dami's Cross* and *Early Morning* highlight economic-driven migration, and *Rise* portrays migration as an avenue for self-actualization and success.

2. Narrative Techniques and Artistic Choices. Plays and films employ distinct storytelling approaches to explore migration. Theatre relies on dialogue, allegory, and stage symbolism, as seen in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, which

uses Yoruba mythology to address migration as exile. On the other hand, films leverage visual storytelling, cinematography, and character-driven realism, as seen in *Rise* and *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel*, where migration is depicted through personal ambition and romantic entanglements.

3. Ideological Perspectives on Migration. The study found that Nigerian plays tend to critique migration as a response to socio-political instability, often highlighting cultural dislocation, loss of identity, and ethical dilemmas (*Dami's Cross*, *Early Morning*). In contrast, films generally portray migration as a journey of transformation, adaptation, and reinvention (*Rise*, *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel*). However, Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: the King's Horseman* serves as an exception, using colonial history to critique forced migration and cultural loss.

4. Influence on Public Perception and Discourse. The study confirmed that both theatre and film shape public discourse on migration by setting agendas and framing migration experiences. Agenda Setting Theory explains how these works highlight migration issues, while Framing Theory reveals how these narratives shape societal attitudes toward migration, either as a necessity or as a dilemma. Plays such as *Early Morning* frame migration as a societal failure, while films like *Rise* emphasize personal agency and success.

5. Effectiveness of Theatre and Film in Addressing Migration Issues. Theatre offers intellectual and philosophical depth, allowing for immediate audience engagement and critique of migration policies (*Dami's Cross*, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*). Film, with its wider reach and emotional appeal, effectively sensitizes audiences on migration realities (Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: the King's Horseman*, *Rise*). The study found that both mediums are complementary to the theatre and fosters critical reflection, while film enhances accessibility and relatability.

7.RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promoting Balanced Narratives on Migration by artists. Playwrights and filmmakers should avoid one-sided portrayals of migration as either purely aspirational (*Rise*) or entirely tragic (*Dami's Cross*). Instead, they should present nuanced perspectives that reflect both the opportunities and challenges of migration. The Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) and theatre institutions should support productions that address underrepresented aspects of migration, such as return migration and intergenerational consequences.

2. Strengthening Theatre and Film as Educational Tools on Migration. Universities should incorporate migration-themed plays and films into Theatre Arts, Film Studies, and Migration Studies curricula. This will ensure critical engagement with migration discourse among scholars, students, and policymakers. Community theatre initiatives should be developed to raise awareness of migration policies, risks of irregular migration, and reintegration challenges for returnees.

3. Leveraging Digital Platforms for Wider Audience Engagement. Given the growing influence of streaming services and digital theatre, migration-themed productions should be made more accessible through online platforms. Nigerian theatre practitioners should explore hybrid theatre-film productions, combining stage performances with digital screenings to reach a broader and more diverse audience.

4. Enhancing Policy Engagement through Theatre and Film. The government and NGOs should collaborate with theatre practitioners and filmmakers to produce migration-focused content that can inform policies on diaspora engagement, brain drain, and cultural preservation. Policies should support the integration of return migrants through media representation, ensuring that their voices and experiences are reflected in artistic works.

5. Encouraging Further Research on Migration in Nigerian Theatre and Film. Future research should explore gendered migration narratives in Nigerian plays and films, comparative migration narratives between Nigerian and other African artistic productions, and the impact of digital media on migration storytelling, particularly through web series, short films, and online theatre performances.

8.CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Nigerian theatre and film serve as critical platforms for shaping migration discourse. Through their distinct narrative techniques, ideological framing, and artistic approaches, plays and films not only reflect migration experiences but also actively influence public perception and policy discourse. While theatre excels in philosophical interrogation and audience engagement, film enhances visual realism and accessibility, making both mediums equally significant in migration discourse. The study recommends a more balanced portrayal of migration, stronger integration of migration themes in education and policy-making, and greater use of digital media to amplify migration narratives. Ultimately, as migration continues to define contemporary Nigerian experiences, its representation in theatre and film must evolve to offer richer, more diverse, and policy-relevant narratives that resonate with both local and global audiences.

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