

The Narratives of Migration and Diaspora in Modern African Literature: the Case of Chimamanda ADICHIE's *Americanah*

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Abstract: *The representation of migration which is still viewed as a human movement has become a global issue. The concept becomes one of the core subjects of many contemporary writings in African literature. The main cause of this phenomenon of migration remains unemployment, state repression, violence, conflict, xenophobia as well as dictatorial and authoritarian regimes. In the context of African literature, African intellectuals exile due to political repression. They go in search for a new identity. In African literary scene, many intellectuals face the experience of exile. Among them, we can name Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Alex La Guma to name but a few writers who left their homelands in quest of political stability.*

The Nigerian writer Chimamanda ADICHIE, an award-winning writer focuses on stylistic investigation of the issue of international migration in her novel Americanah which explores the concept of race, skin color, identity, love, romance and politics which the female writer transcends the border of international migration. The aim of this study is to demonstrate how the experience of migration is often associated with the experience of displacement and racism. It is also significant to note that migratory movements often bring about the sense of identity crisis, and alienation which remain the consequences of displacement.

Key words: *alienation, discrimination, displacement, identity, migration*

I. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi ADICHIE was born in Enugu State, Nigeria in 1977. She was a Nigerian writer, essayist, playwright, poet and novelist. She attended Ibadan University where she studied medicine and pharmacy. ADICHIE was also a former graduate of Drexel University where she learnt political science and communications. A year later, she received a Master's degree from John Hopkins University. In 2004, ADICHIE's book *Purple Hibiscus* reviews the feeling of homesickness as well as the horrors of the Nigerian civil war where ADICHIE lost her grandfather and some relatives. Her second novel was published in 2006 by Fourth State in London in United Kingdom.

Her novel *Americanah* explores the life of a Nigerian woman who faces racism in America and finally lost her identity. The word *Americanah* is significant as it refers to an identity based on previous experience of living in America as the female writer uses a Nigerian word which demonstrates those who have been to America and return back to their homelands.

Adichie's novel illustrates the themes of culture, tradition, and the dangers of the Nigerian civil war. The theme of education plays a crucial role in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* where female education becomes a tenet for women's empowerment and emancipation. The concept of feminism is also a major issue dealt with by this Nigerian writer who was much influenced by the Nigerian female scholar Buchi Emecheta who is much fond of the theme of motherhood with the publication of her novel *Second Class Citizen*.

As a Nigerian female novelist, Adichie closely deals with the theme of war, the concept of cultural identity as well as the clash between tradition and modernity. The publication of her collection of short stories reviews the issue of violence from which people including men and women suffer from hostile environment. The problem of war is a central theme in Adichie's fiction as wars rob Adichie's characters of identity, freedom and power.

The first part of this study will highlight the hard experience of displacement and the concept of racism which often derive from the idea of migration either national and international migration which pave the way for the sense of homesickness and the desire of return. In the second part, the emphasis will be laid on the sense of identity crisis associated with migratory movements which often culminated in alienation, dehumanization and depersonalization of many migrants.

II. Displacement and Racism in *Americanah*

In her novel *Americanah*, Adichie explores the theme of race and identity especially the difference between Nigerian and American politics. The female writer focuses on the important place of young intellectuals in modern society as Nigerians left their native countries in search of new identities. Most of intellectuals previously experienced political turmoil in their own countries as well as racism in foreign European nations. Adichie's *Americanah* focuses on Ifemelu who strives so far to reconcile the cultural roots of her Nigerian society with the expectations of the American society so as to assimilate into American culture. Ifemelu adopts an American accent; she even uses a false social security card and also manages to relax her hair in order to fit into American culture:

*Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do.*¹

In the 19th century, the concept of race began to be considered as an important factor which categorized people into white and black people who shared fundamental, physical, cultural and moral characteristics. In her novel *Americanah*, Adichie defines race as follows:

*But race is not biology, race is sociology. Race is not genotype, race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it is about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair.*²

As a critique of race and racism in America, the novel *Americanah* is a blending of three cultural backgrounds represented by America, England and Nigeria. There is a racial hierarchy in Nigeria. Light-skinned people are more considered in that modern society. Even in America, the female character Auntie Uji who is doctor suffered from racial discrimination in an American context of white supremacy. The dynamics of race and racism in African literature always play a key role in modern African literature.

Among them are outstanding writers as Achebe, Soyinka, Emecheta, Sefi Atta to name but a few intellectuals who continue to carry the torch borne by African writers. Language discrimination is another type of discrimination in *Americanah*. In order to escape victimization, the female character Ifemelu tries so hard and decides to change her behavior to conform to American expectation as the American woman Cristina Tomas openly criticizes Ifemelu's Nigerian accent. This situation which is symbolic of racial discrimination is typical of American society and culture where the legacy of slavery gendered racial hatred and segregation based on color and religion. This hard reality of slavery deprived several African-Americans of their dignity, identity and

¹ Chimamanda, Ngozi, ADICHIE, *Americanah*, London: Fourth State, 2013, p.208

² Chimamanda, Ngozi, ADICHIE, *Americanah*, op.cit, p.337

humanity in which the idea of ethnicity, multiculturalism, and racism have long become the subject of debate around the world.

Victims of oppression and marginalization, exploitation, women have long suffered from overt silence imposed upon them by racial prejudices. They always remain at the bottom of the ladder as women, mothers, and child-bearers are supposed to stay at home, feed their children and take care of their husbands and their in-laws while most of them are beaten and ill-treated. In this respect, the Nigerian writer Achebe does not shy from revealing the personal predicament of his female characters who remain the object and the subject of men's will. This perception of African women has changed a lot due to the emergence of female voices in postcolonial era. Western education is an important tenet which paves the way for female empowerment, emancipation and self-recognition.

Migration is the movement of people from one area to another in a desire to settle permanently or temporarily. People migrated for such reasons as quest for better life, wealth, health and employment or escaping poverty, injustice, political and economic repression. Considered as a paradise for most Sub-Saharan African migrants, Europe turns out to be a place where poverty, displacement and racism, and homelessness become a central issue in contemporary literature. In Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, the character Adah has the intention of moving to the United Kingdom which becomes one of his best dreams:

*I have been thinking, Adah said all o a sudden. I used to dream one day, I would go the United Kingdom why don't we save and go now that we shall be able o afford it,*³

There is a similarity between Emecheta's *The Second Class Citizen* and Soyinka's *The Telephone Conversation* which is written by internationally renowned writer Wole Soyinka from Nigeria who deals with the social issues plaguing Nigerian society and Africa in general. This poem uses ironic instances and satirical elements to critique social prejudices of Nigerian society. This outstanding poem by Soyinka is another conversation between a white woman and a black man over the telephone as the black is seeking a room for rent which a white lady has advertised. But over the phone, the white lady asks the black man if he is completely black or not. The poem shows the prevalence of racist attitude in Western society. Written after the Nigerian independence from Great Britain and even before the Nigerian civil war, the author of *Swamp Dwellers* was produced in Nigeria in 1956.

In 1986, Soyinka became the first black African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature as he devoted his speech to Nelson Mandela and the ill-consequences of the apartheid system in South Africa. In 1975, Soyinka's play *Death and The King's Horseman* was turned into a film with the financial assistance of Netflix. In this respect, the anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon relates the complexities of migrant returning to fit into his own culture. Fanon's work on National culture analyses the native intellectual migrants in his own land as he seek to separate himself from the culture he has assimilated in order to embrace his own culture.

As a first Nobel Prize winner, the Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka is one the most outstanding authors, poets, novelists and playwrights. The intellectuals completely address the danger of Nigerian civil war, post-independence political turmoil as well as the portrayal of Nigerian society and culture. With his novel *Interpreters*, Soyinka addresses the dynamics of migration and displacement and how most independence African nations like Nigeria experience political tensions inherent to neocolonial regimes. The book *Interpreters* explore the lives of the new African elites who have experienced international migration bone of the most complex pieces of fiction as his book portrays a directionless seen mainly through the eyes of a few university educated intellectuals who after returning to their homelands to occupy especial positions.

³ Buchi, EMECHETA, *Second Class Citizen*, United Kingdom, Allison and Busby, 1974, p. 27

Buchi Emecheta who was one the most outstanding Nigerian female authors strive to analyze in her works the cultural dynamics of Nigerian society as well as the problematic of migratory movements in which female intellectuals make a better choice by returning to their homelands in order to seek for freedom and independence which is a landmark of true identity.

In Adichie's *Americanah*, most characters had faced the predicament of a loss of identity, otherness and displacement. This situation is illustrative of the behavior of many characters in the novel *Americanah* where there is the experience of disillusionment; lack of identity derives from international migration.

III. The Theme of Identity Crisis, Otherness and Exile in *Americanah*

As a famous outspoken feminist, Adichie's messages carry out the concept of empowerment, race and culture. As a proponent of women's rights, Adichie explores such issues as race, identity, nationalism, the intersection between African and western cultures.

This is a great opportunity for us to consider the role and the position of African writers who have focused on the representation of migration and exile in modern contemporary African fiction in which the concept of migration becomes one the core subjects of African literature. The experience of migration can be traced back to the years of slavery, a historical process which displaced millions of people from Africa to America following the Atlantic slave trade in which most African people lost their lives by crossing the coastal borders.

This slave trade which was masterminded by European powerful nations is followed by another tragic historical event shaped by colonization which in its turn caused the displacement of many African people who were victims of oppression, exploitation for several centuries back. This migratory movement continued its journey even through many African nations did achieve political independence in the sixties. However, during the independence period, the issue of migration continues to be a real preoccupation for many African nations especially sub-Saharan nations where displaced people have long suffered and kept on experiencing the heavy consequences of economic underdevelopment of their nations.

Sefi Atta is one of the most prominent female writers to chronicle the dynamics of Nigerian culture and tradition. The publication of her work *The Bad Immigrant* reviews the concept of race and the hard experience of African immigrants which turns out to be a central issue in African literature. As a female writer, Sefi Atta's themes cover a wide range of issues including interracial issues and tensions as well as the migration of Africans in America.

Like Adichie's novels which explore the hard experience of African immigrants in America, Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* cements the same situation of migration and the risks of a loss of identity as well as the issue of racism which most immigrants face in their host countries, a situation which compel them to contemplate a return to their homelands. Similarly, in *The Bad Immigrant*, the male character Lukman sees himself as a bad immigrant through he holds a doctorate degree in literature from his native country Nigeria.

Lukman after relocating to America began to work as a security guard and later he became househusband a role which is contrary to Nigerian lifestyles. The idea of racism remains prevalent in Adichie's works. The main characters Efemelu and Obinze who respectively migrated to United States of America and England face racial inequalities which affected their identities. In contemporary Africa, the rise of migration becomes a major preoccupation for most African writers, as the male character Obinze strives to relocate to London with the expectation of escaping unemployment after university graduation but he was finally deported to Nigeria after attempting a faked marriage and operating fake identity card.

It is significant to note that most of the time; a migrant usually experiences many hardships such as racism, discrimination and xenophobia, and issues that handicap their state of living abroad which results in a sense of hopelessness and longing for motherlands. Here lies a sense of cultural diversity, a clash between tradition and modernity as the exiles feel a sense of alienation. As an illustration, in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, the author

chronicles the migration of the protagonist Obi Okwonkwo to Paris for specific purposes. This Diaspora movement was motivated by the quest of knowledge and wisdom abroad for them to return to their countries in order to be the eyes and the ears of their communities. This sense of disillusionment remains the hard realities of most immigrants who are unwanted guests and keep on suffering from xenophobia, discrimination and so on.

EMECHEA's *Kehinde* analyses the plight of women living and suffering in polygamous families. Written from a gender-based perspective, the novel *Kehinde* tells the story of a female character Kehinde and her husband Albert and their contemplation over returning to Nigeria after living in London for 18 years. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie did not shy from analyzing the hardships of immigration and the social issues associated with displacement in which most immigrants lost personal identity and are faced with the concept of cultural assimilation abroad.

This issue remains the subject matter of Adichie's *The Thing around Your Neck*, a novel which deeply illustrates the themes of marriage, and gender roles as well as colonialism and the cycle of violence in foreign countries.

Emecheta's novel *Second Class Citizen* chronicles domestic violence, abuse, the issue of race, gender, the lens of discrimination both in England and Nigeria. As a semi- autobiographical imaging of Emecheta's life as a female character, the novel *Second Class Citizen* also recounts the migratory movement in contemporary African literature. There is an important similarity between the heroine's life and Emecheta's trajectory. This novel is a perfect portrayal of a female protagonist called Adah who left her country Nigeria before moving to England in search for better employment opportunities in host countries in which most African migrants face the predicament of racism based on color. The heroine experiences this kind of racism when her husband Francis and she were looking for a flat in England to live in, as a result the white owner refused to rent black people or colored.

The theme of identity is one of the most essential themes dealt by outstanding African novelists. The quest for identity in the native and foreign lands has been the main preoccupation of Adichie's fiction. From the perspective of migratory movement, Adichie's *Americanah* analyses the ironic behavior of African migrants who left their homelands for better opportunities in America:

*Alexa and other guests, and perhaps and even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him who was raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards something else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, so as to live none of them starving or raped or from the burned villages but merely hungry for choice and certainty.*⁴

The theme of identity crisis which is most prevalent in contemporary African societies becomes the landmark of migration novels where most characters suffer from a loss of identity abroad. This situation is typical of the character Ifemelu in *Americanah* who after migrating to USA realizes that the American-Africans have the least amount of privilege in the American social hierarchy. As a consequence, the black doctors Aunt Uji as well as Ifemelu the University graduate suffer in silence from the consequences of racial discrimination which have always deprived black American people of their dignity and to enjoy their rights as free citizens.

Unable to work in America as a result of her student visa, Ifemelu decides to use another woman's papers in order to find a job, pay rent and tuition. This hard living condition encountered in metropolitan societies drives Nigerian intellectuals like Ifemelu to use sex work in order to survive. This moral decadence leads to her loss of identity in an American context of racial discrimination where African-American black people are minimized and ignored in this society.

⁴ Chimamanda, Ngozi, ADICHIE, *Americanah*, op.cit, p.276

Otherwise, the theme of Americanization is the most prominent themes in *Americanah*. Because, either America or Europe those places have always been regarded as a paradise, symbol of hope, wealth, social and economic mobility but also a sign of disappointment. As Efemelu and Obinze who respectively migrated to USA and England are confronted with hard living conditions abroad as the problem of immigrants' integration into a new culture, the issue of racism, work, rent and tuition. The word "Americanah" which was described as those who have been to US and return with American expectations as the lack of economic opportunity and natural or disaster, persecution, and migratory movement remain Adichie's foundation theory.

In this respect, the Nigerian writer Helon Habila also pays attention to the issue of migration and its destructive consequences on the lives of thousands of African migrants who died while crossing the coastal borders as well as those who suffered from racism, violence, identity crisis, discrimination and other hard living conditions which left most of them more disastrous and helpless abroad. Habila's outstanding novel *The Travelers* chronicle the hard side of refugee asylum as well as dire experience of international migration.

Similarly *A Palace in the Old Village* is a portrait of an immigrant facing retirement and the problems of identity. Tahar Ben Jellon who is the author of this novel was an outstanding Moroccan essayist, critic, poet and novelist. This novel portrays an immigrant who spent for forty years in France working in an automobile factory and is about to retire. In this respect in African contemporary literature, Nigerian writers have played a major role in portraying the issues of contemporary Africa. Wole Soyinka as a Nobel Prize Winner in Literature in 1986 was the first African to receive this distinction. His play *Swamp Dwellers* reviews the issues of social injustice, hypocrisy and power.

IV. Conclusion

The experience of displacement and racism has always been a major issue in contemporary African fiction dealt with by many African writers. The phenomenon of international migration has often caused mass exodus, led to dehumanization and depersonalization of many migrants in the quest for better life opportunities, and employment abroad. However many people were forced into exile or persecuted in their home countries, most of them want to escape oppression, civil war or violence. This situation will obviously results in a sense of identity crisis and otherness once they migrated to foreign countries where many migrants experience the concept of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. It is significant to reveal that the issue of migration is all the more important as it may lead to multiculturalism, the ability to encounter many different cultural, social, political backgrounds which is a real foundation for the recognition for universal culture. The immigrant experience as well the prejudices most of them face in Europe remains the subject matter of his work, the difficulty to reconcile western and Islamic values seem a real predicament.

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