

African Diaspora Literature: A tool for Sustainable Development using Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah

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Abstract

Stories in Nigerian Literature carry a unique ability to teach, admonish and denounce while representing a way to fight conventional issues in Nigeria and beyond. This paper deals with issues of national identity and diasporic experiences of Nigerians in other countries, through the perspectives of Nigerian authors. Recent writings by Nigerian author re-write Nigerian sojourn in alien nations and exodus from Nigeria from the perspectives of diaspora. In analyzing the novel under review, we focused on the relationship between subjects /characters and actions. Its main focus is on the issues of sex trafficking, racial segregation, gender discrimination, migration, nationality and dual identity. These issues tend to hinder efforts of the Nigerian nation to achieve nationhood. The paper also provides insights into the hybridity of the migrant experience, where the migrant struggles to negotiate new cultural spaces. It shows that while some migrants successfully adapt and integrate into new Western locales, others exist at the margins unable to fully negotiate cultural differences. The diaspora becomes a space for opportunities and economic mobility, as well as alienation and uncertainties. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this study, we have adopted New Historicism as a theoretical framework for the analysis of the characters and their actions. Finally, the study suggests that there is need to incorporate into national discuss raised by novelists on national identity and diasporic experiences in this era of globalization for sustainable development.

Keywords: - Migration, nationality, identity crisis, gullibility, racism, sex trafficking.

Introduction

African Diaspora as a major historical occurrence has been thrashed extensively over time by different scholars and in different areas of study. However, this study will be focusing on diasporic literary works from African pedigree to illustrate that literary works have a periscope function which gives expression to a writer's fertile thoughts and imagination. In other words, African Diasporic writers cannot divorce themselves from implying in one way or another in their fictional representation of the African diasporic experiences, that the "genesis" of this sojourn dates back to the history of the African people and their contact with the Europeans which resulted to slavery and colonial imperialism and how this encounter and its detrimental assorted paraphernalia of racism, loss of identity, hopelessness, disillusionment and other physical, mental and emotional vices. This confrontation generated in their home countries ages past, is still been experienced in their host countries till date.

For these African writers therefore, it is more a thing of decrying the fact that even though colonialism ended long ago, there are still major traces of what this paper terms "*unintentional neo-colonialism*". From what has been gathered from some diasporic texts, one gets the illusion that the whites of this age despite the awareness they have now, as compared to when Africa as a continent was under the clutches of colonial obliteration might think they have grown out of the derogatory portrayal of Africans by their ancestors, but that is not the case. This is so because the people of the host countries are guilty of what Adichie in her 2009 TED talk calls "the danger of a single story" of the African people. This is probably because writers like John Locke, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce etcetera who represent the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West, had portrayed Africa as a place of negatives and darkness. This depiction has to a large extent affected the "white child" right from infancy who has been groomed to believe that everyone black with an African ancestry is an unintelligent, barbaric fool and a tool for ridicule. Ann B. Dobie quoting from Edward Said's *Orientalism* in her work titled "*Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*" supports the above assertion when she said that the Europeans "view of the "other" world- "orientalism"- is inevitably colored by their own cultural, political, and religious backgrounds, leading them to depict those unlike themselves as inferior and objectionable- for example, as lazy, deceitful, and irrational. The self, by contrast, is defined as good, upright, and moral" (207). Thus, they claim to know all about Africa from what they have read and the story they have been told, that it is now quite difficult for them to dissociate fact from fiction and this is where the unintentional colonialism comes in. For example this excerpt from Adichie's *Americanah*:

But when Ifemelu returned with the letter, Cristian Tomas said, "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?"... Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling. "I speak English" she said. "I bet you do," Cristina Tomas said. "I just don't know how well" (133).

It is obvious that Cristina Tomas in the above passage has a single story about Africa and Africans; people that are so backward, they can't speak nor understand English. It's possible she thinks she is being helpful by speaking slowly, but unknowingly she has unintentionally taken from Ifemelu the remaining dignity she had because in the following week, as autumn's coolness descended Ifemelu "began to practice an American accent" (134).

Writers like Joseph Conrad, John Locke and the rest, have shown Africa and Africans as bad over and over again. And over the years, that is what we have become in their minds and this has translated into the different treatment we see bestowed on the African person. Thus, African writers in their different fictional narratives have appropriated the literary text as a vehicle of channeling their diasporic worldview. Hence, Adichie and other writers of African descent have earned their reputation and fame not just because of the stories they tell, but how they tell these stories. This paper therefore, using New Historicism theory is an attempt to probe Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, to establish the fact that literary works do not just mirror reality but acts as a prism that reflects the distorted but clearer image of reality in its representation of the African Diasporas and their experiences. The justification for the selection of this text is informed by a desire to objectify the intention of this paper and for readers to fully comprehend how African diasporic experiences are exhibited in literary texts. Therefore, there is a need to first understand what African Diaspora is.

African Diaspora

According to Anderson (1983) "The African diaspora is a term that refers to the dispersal of African peoples to form a distinct, transnational community. It is most often used to refer to Africans and their descendants living outside the continent, but diasporas have formed within Africa as well. At its simplest, the word diaspora is defined as a dispersion of a people from their original homeland". The term derives from the Greek verb diaspeirein meaning "to scatter", and it is expressed in English in other words with the spr root, such as "spore," "disperse," Until recently, the term was most closely associated with the dispersion of Jewish peoples, although there are also extensive bodies of literature about the Armenian, Greek, and African diasporas. The term African diaspora was first adopted by scholars in the mid-twentieth century, but the concept of a global community of African descendants may be traced back much further.

It can be argued that all of humanity may be considered part of the African diaspora, based on the archaeological evidence that humankind originated in East Africa, subsequently migrating to other regions of the world. However, the use of diaspora as an interpretive concept requires greater specific about what types of migrations are diasporas. As the field of diaspora studies developed in the late twentieth century, scholars began to identify certain features that distinguish diasporas from other types of migrations.

Before now whenever the issue of African diaspora is raised, the first thing that comes to mind is the dispersion of Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This is so because the transatlantic slave trade was responsible for the forced migration of millions of African people to the western hemisphere. It is thus pertinent to say that although slavery existed since the prehistorical era, African diaspora dates back to the enslavement, forceful and inhumane transportation of Africans to different western countries by the Europeans to work on their plantations, build their colonies and act as slaves for the rich white elites thereby stripping African societies of their most virile members and thus created the first African diaspora in the Americas.

The Africans in this first diaspora were obviously sought after for their physical strength. For easy assimilation however, this paper will divide African diaspora into two major waves: the first wave falls into what is called forced or involuntary migration of Africans as discussed above, slavery. The appalling collapse of the economies of most independent African nations has in recent times triggered another exodus from the continent. This time, however, the emigration is voluntary. Today, African diaspora is a mixture of willing and forced migration from the African continent. These Africans migrate from one continent to the other to seek for better education, employment, and better living condition. To buttress this point is Kehinde's assertion that: "The voluntariness to migrate foreign lands, can be weighed against the backdrop of the absence of environment capable of offering its citizenry the opportunity for a meaningful existence" (2).

The above assertion is true to an extent, but do all African migrants sojourn from their own home of origin because of lack of opportunities? No! Their reason for seeking succour abroad varies from an individual to the other. Adichie's *Americanah* did not show characters dying from hunger or starvation, instead her work centers on two

young lovers, Ifemelu and Obinze, who migrate to the United States and the United Kingdom respectively not because of the familiar stories of fleeing from natural disaster, war or poverty, but because they are running away from what Adichie calls the "lethargy of choicelessness" in the novel (276). Both Ifemelu and Obinze belong to the Nigerian middle class where the need to migrate is not brought on by poverty but by the quest to experience something new somewhere else. This battle against choicelessness is clearly projected to the reader through Obinze's mind while attending a dinner in a friend's house during his short stay in Britain. When Alexa, one of the guests, commends Blunkett's intention to make Britain continue to be a refuge to survivors of frightful wars, Obinze agrees with her, yet feels alienated because his own migration story is different from those common ones motivated by wars and woes just like Adichie narrated:

Alexa, and the other guests, and perhaps 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 were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else...none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty (276).

From her work we have got to realize that although their migration is voluntary, they all had their personal reasons for leaving the shores of Africa. For Aunty Uju it was to escape the evil plan General's family has for her and her son; for Obinze, it was his love for America; for Ifemelu, it was to escape the constant strike in Nigerian higher institutions and quest for better educational opportunity; for Emenike, it was the belief that 'the road of America is paved with gold'. For each his own reason, but with the same expectation that America or the host country will welcome him/her with open arms, although this infallible belief of theirs was discarded when they came face to face with the real thing. Thus, even though the crude and dilapidating condition of the African continent is a contributing factor to the reason why some of her sons and daughters leave their land of birth to the diaspora, it is however limiting to restrict their movement to this single biased opinion.

African Diaspora Literature as an Emblem of Representation

The African diasporic writing emerged to fight the battles of and for African communities in various locations on the continent. The African writer emerged as a true voice of Africa and Africans, and as the conscience of the society, boldly challenged unsustainable myths and stereotypes of Africa and Africans in the wider world. The African diasporic writers have set straight the age-old concept of 'art for art's sake', taking on the issues of the human condition in diaspora and aligning himself or herself with the cause of the people. 'Art for art's sake' has been rejected in the new definition of the function of art as a vital force in its representation of the African people's societal consciousness. African diasporic writers in general boldly and bluntly attack the ravages of colonialism on the continent of Africa and proceed to tell the story of the colonial encounter and its effects from the African point of view. Achebe, along with his contemporaries, who saw their roles as those of teachers, educators, and pace-setters, defended their sense of mission in a number of literary essays. In his article, *'The Novelist as Teacher'*, Achebe declared:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive (4).

Evidently, therefore, Achebe and his contemporaries, saw their artistic roles as those of reeducating their readers and they believed that works of fiction is the perfect channel in which to wage 'wars' against imperialism, colonialism, corruption, dehumanization and ignorance at home and later abroad. African diasporic writers have ceaselessly written on the varied incidents and social dilemma faced in their homeland and in a foreign land. In this case, diasporic literature treats matters and experiences of Africans in a foreign land. Such experiences include, but are not restricted to the following; racism, loss of identity, hopelessness/disillusionment and gender inequality—a pattern of ideology in "Africa in which women are regarded as the weaker sex and are looked upon as people who cannot stand on their own unless they are entrusted to men" (Udamba & Ojukwu 2023: 154). Specifically, this paper discusses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* to explicate inherent issues that connect the above-mentioned thematic preoccupations.

Racism

Writings like Adichie's *Americanah* examine blackness in America, Nigeria and Britain, but it is also a good illustration of the universal human diasporic experience. Racism is mostly portrayed in Ifemelu's blog titled

"Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (those formerly known as Negros) by a non American Black". Ifemelu blogs about what she experiences and observes, and as her social sphere expands so does her blog entries, though a bit preachy at times, becomes all the more intriguing. In the post entitled "To My Fellow Non American Blacks: In America You are Black Baby", Ifemelu writes about race thus:

Dear Non-American Blacks, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black, stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaica or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care... in describing black women you admire, always use the word "STRONG" because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY. And if you are a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you're about to pull a gun (220).

Adichie explores race openly and effectively. In the above excerpt, she gives a detailed summary of how the African diaspora person is approached and from what angle he /she is viewed in America. A person's country of origin is not considered as Adichie stresses above so long as the person's skin colour is black, the individual forever remain that different other separated from the mainstream American society. This shows that the race subject in America has really not changed much. It is still a major stumbling block against which many immigrants has continued hit their foot against and, of course, constitutes one of the reasons for the personal despair of African diasporas in different western countries.

Loss of Identity

The novel is not only about race in America, but also about identity loss among African immigrants. In order to fit in, most of them had to become 'more American'. In their manner of speech, approach and to an extent what they eat. Auntie Uju, Ginika, Bartholomew and even Ifemelu had to learn American accent to belong in the new world they have found themselves. For Emenike, his case is quite different; he was " married to a British woman, lived in a British home, worked at a British job, travelled on a British passport, and said 'exercise' to refer to a mental rather than a physical activity. He had longed for this life, and never quite believe he would have it. Now his backbone was stiff with self-satisfaction. He was satisfied" (267). In other words, he is contented the way things are. In his conversation with Obinze he said: "I miss Naija. It's been so long, but I just haven't had the time to travel back home. Besides, Georgina would not survive a visit to Nigeria". This means that going home for Emenike is not in the foreseeable future. Bartholomew is no different from Emenike:

Bartholomew wore khaki trousers pulled up high on his belly, and spoke with an American accent filled with holes, mangling words until they are impossible to understand... with his gonnas and wannas...Ifemelu should not have spoken, but there was something about Bartholomew that made silence impossible,... he was one of those people who, in his village back home, would be called "lost." He went to America and got lost, his people would say. He went to America and refused to come back, (pg, 115-116).

Adichie's representation of her characters in her work *Americanah* portrays how some of her characters have lost touch with their own individual identity, they pretend to be what they are not and from Bartholomew we see how far they are willing to go to get rid of their identity and imbibe one that best suits them and that is convenient for them in their new home. From a postcolonial perspective, Bartholomew, being an African in America, has a double identity as both a Nigerian and a wanna be American and it is the recognition of such double identities that constantly weighs him down making him absorb more of the American mannerism. In essence therefore, more than race, *Americanah* is about all the ways people form their identities: what we put on and what we take off, the things we accumulate and those we discard along the way.

Hopelessness and Disillusionment

The majority of African immigrants are disappointed by what they find in their host countries. Right from childhood they must have always believed like every child, that America is the land where all dreams come true without any hurdle, but they got to realize firsthand that it is not so.

In spite of this disappointment and loss of hope, these immigrants refuse to go home. Most of the immigrants are afraid of going home as failures and so wallow in their failures far from home. To them there is nothing good to return home to. This is the case of Ifemelu. Ifemelu feels at odds with the various issues in America. She cannot find a job to do in the country, yet she preferred to stay than to return home to nothing and to be called a disappointment. This subject of hopelessness and disillusionment is seen thus:

Each day, there seems to be a letter for her on the kitchen table, and inside the envelope was tuition bill, and words printed in capital letter: YOUR RECORD WILL BE FROZEN UNLESS PAYMENT IS RECEIVED BY THE DATE AT THE BOTTOM OF THIS NOTICE (132).

This shows that going home for some of these people might happen but definitely not any moment soon. Not minding the bills they gather with no available job to pay back, they delve into all sorts of job to be able to make ends meet. Ifemelu had to sleep with a total stranger for a hundred dollar bill and the outcome, desolation so great that she: "Imagined packing her things, somehow buying a ticket and going back to Lagos. She curled on her bed and cried, wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened" (154).

Ifemelu finds herself surviving through work so humiliating that she cuts off all communication with Obinze and effectively, with herself. Although she bounced back to herself, a part of her was forever tainted with that particular occurrence.

Cultural Difference

This is one major issue that is dominant in almost every diasporic literature and African diasporic one is not an exemption. We see this in Caribbean, Asia, Indian, African and in the works of any continent or country that has ever and is still experiencing any form of diaspora. We see this portrayed in Samuel Selvon's *Lonely Londoner* (1991), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) to mention a few.

Chika Onuigwe in her article "Migration to Belgium" written 14 March, 2013 and published in *Aeon Magazine* brings this problem of culture difference closer home when she said:

In that first month of my migration, I was busy losing my voice in small imperceptible ways. I was finding that nothing I knew before seemed to be of consequence. Not language. Not social etiquette...I woke me up to have breakfast. I was not hungry and I told him as much. 'No, darling,' he said. 'Everyone is at the table. They are waiting for you'. 'Why?' I found it baffling that I would be required to come down to breakfast-whether I was hungry or not- and certainly did not understand why anyone would wait for me before eating(4).

Culture difference is one problem that confronts any individual that has in one way or the other migrated to any country other than his/her country of birth. The struggle to juggle two different cultures and still maintain their sanity and their own individual identity becomes the other of the day. Ifemelu experiences this cultural difference firsthand when she offered an orange to Taylor, a boy she babysits: "He put it in his mouth. His face crumbled. "It's bad! It's got stuff in it!" "Those are the seeds," she said, looking at what he had spat in his hand... "Oranges don't have stuff in them"... "The orange is the right one for me, Morgan. I grew up eating oranges with seeds"...(165)

This is one characteristic of postcolonial criticism; it examines the representation of other cultures in literature and its effect on persons from both cultures and their personal reactions to it.

In writing about Ifemelu's relationship with her fatherland, one must point out that she always maintained contact with the country of her birth. Writing about Ifem's social and political interests in her country of birth, Adichie informs the reader that:

She scoured Nigerian Websites, Nigeria profiles on facebook, Nigerian blog, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand taken some things of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her root in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil (p.6).

Furthermore, she knows it is not possible to complete her studies and still stay behind in Princeton raised enough money that will enable her go back home to set up a private company in Nigeria. There are other options left for her. She could just go back home and work: "she began to plan and to dream to apply for jobs in Lagos" (p. 7). Admittedly she needs to survive in America first before she could think about what amount of money she needs to form a company. There is the little problem of emotional trauma her American boyfriend, Blaine, is making her suffer, even after living together for three months "bonding" is still an issue to solve between both of them. It took the election of Barack Obama for the efforts to resuscitate their love affairs to yield any results (p. 7). (Granted that she enjoys the happiness being close to Blaine brings, she knows she will one day depart America and return

to Nigeria. This is evident in the novel, as depicted by the way she reacts to him. The narrator informs us that it is not possible for one to miss something one no longer wanted. For Item: "Blaine needed what she was unable to give" (p. 8). What good was there in investing in any relationship with Blaine? If she goes ahead to put all she has got into the relationship with Blaine her conscience will always remind her that she did not need to do that because she will return to Nigeria one day, especially with the thought of returning to Nigeria to re-unite with Obinze staring her in the face.

Adichie's *Americanah* juxtaposes hope and impediments. She juxtaposes her hope that Nigerians who depart the country for greener pastures in alien nations will one day return because they believe that home is always the place to be against the impediment represented by the lack of different choices facing the citizens because the country has become a "parched wasteland of joblessness" (pp. 45-16). It is this juxtaposition, the combination of hope and impediments that you remember when you read that:

The country was starved of hope, cars stuck for days in long, sweaty petrol lines, pensioners raising wilting placards demanding their pay, lecturers gathering to announce yet one more strike. But Auntie Uju did not want to leave; she had for as long as Ifemelu could remember, dreamed of owning a private clinic, and she held that dream in a tight clasp (p. 46).

Conclusion

It has been established from the novel and from other examples taken from other texts on African diaspora that Africans both on the homeland and in diaspora are writing in response to the social, political and cultural milieu in which they find themselves. This diaspora won't be making so much wave if the experiences Africans in diaspora go through are not represented in most diasporic literatures as we have them today. One cannot disassociate subject matters like racial issues, culture difference, hopelessness and disillusionment, nostalgia, depression and other similar areas of concern from African diasporic texts and that is why new historicism theory suits this study better because discussing African diaspora without making mention of the colonial encounter with Africa is to an extent incomplete. This is so because it has been argued by Hall (1988) "that in the postcolonial world, the nation is a place, a simultaneous narrative of fulfillment and conflict which has given writers and intellectuals an 'imaginary plenitude' (120). Thus, this paper is an investigation into African diasporic writers' creative imagination and output to see how they view the African Diasporas' new world and how their adopted worlds look at them.

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