

THE GRASS IS NOT ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE: REVISITING MIGRANT NARRATIVE IN ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH

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Abstract

The phenomenon of human migration, otherwise known as Westward movement in search of greener pastures in continental Europe and America, has continued to gain copious expressions in both literary and non-literary discourse across disciplines. Writers from erstwhile European colonies like the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Africa among others have artistically documented fictional experiences of migrant characters, all of whom are portrayed to have embarked on desperate journeys as the viable escapement from the protracted economic woes and political instabilities of their respective countries of origin. In most fictional narratives, the rippling effects of neo-colonialism, neo-slavery which directly translated into total disillusionment with the postcolonial states, have been identified as the triple stimuli for such migrations. One such narrative that hinges on the migrant-status of individual character(s) is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah. Using postcolonial literary theory, this paper argues that the lingering effects of colonialism have amplified the alleged emptiness of most colonies thus, succeeds in the pristine projection of the West as utopia in the minds and psyches of many immigrants. This tendency has successfully lured migrant characters to continental Europe and America where lives turn out to be a mirage and a direct opposite of what they envisioned back home.

Keywords: Migration, Americanah, Neo-slavery, Neo-colonialism, Narrative, Postcolonial, Adichie.

Introduction

Human beings, by their internal compositions and external dispositions, are naturally known for their genuine aspirations for a better standard of living which would invariably translate into, or perhaps give primacy to human desire and dignity. Thus, "migration is assumed to be prompted by the desire for

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change in social status" (Yerima 94) of an individual. Over the centuries, the attainments of such desires and aspirations had been abruptly quashed due to the historical phenomena of war, colonialism and slavery, where humanity is relegated to its lowest ebb, cultural practices are adulterated and economic viabilities are raped. Although the Western apologists (the convicted culprits of crime against humanity) had long proclaimed the end of colonial rule as demonstrated by the pretentious withdrawal of its physical presence from their former colonies; hence the resultant proscription of slave-trade, what these erstwhile colonies are currently experiencing in the 21st century is neo-colonialism and neo-slavery, which many have rightly adjudged to be the immediate aftershock of imperial conquest and its attendant colonial rule.

Not only did colonialism alter the historicity of the colonized nations but, "the experience ... is so profound that it continues to define aspects of the lives of postcolonial peoples ranging from cultural, social, economic and political to psychological issues" (Yerima1). Indeed, "colonialism", writes Yerima, "has had effects of a rippling nature with numerous present-day phenomena having it as their root cause" (69). The lingering effects of these present-day phenomena have been highlighted to include racism, hybridity, sexism, homosexuality and migration of the colonized subjects among others.

Migration, which is the key concept of this essay, is viewed using hosts of scholarly barometers. In critiquing the phenomenon, a number of factors have been identified both as its immediate and remote causes. In the words of Abu Sabe "extreme poverty, starvation, warfare, and environmental degradation have become an African lot and image hence fueling migration through any means necessary" (3). In the same vein, Princewill Dimkpa further argues that "the migration of Nigerians to European countries is mostly associated with economic challenges or factors such as unemployment, lack of sufficient income, lack of economic growth, financial problems and debts" (1). Drawing from the combination of the aforementioned factors, one can easily submit that the attainment of basic necessities of life, which according to Karl Max include "food, clothe, and shelter" (18), is the immediate cause of westward migration in search of greener pastures.

Migration is an ancient practice that comes in different shapes and hues, which essentially involves mass movement of group of people from one geographic location to another in search of better life. The movement could either forcefully or self-induced. This aged-long practice has been reincarnated in contemporary times, having the quest for greener pastures as its motivational force. Migration has become a well-known phenomenon in African

life thus, earned a place in its literature. Abu Sabe sees the duo (migration and African life) as being so inextricable intertwined that "African writers have been caught in the migration web, especially during colonial rule due to their involvement with nationalist struggles for independence..."(2). Soon after the quasi-independence of most African states, which Henson dismisses as a mere "Africanization of colonialism" (120) thus; political disillusionment set in, living an overwhelming majority of Africans utterly disenchanted with the dawn of a new era, which at first seemed promising, only to be marred by economic woes and political instability. Such a disappointing scenario begets hopelessness, luring many Africans into what Abu Sabe calls "the quest to make it to Europe using any means necessary" (1). This quest has become a fertile ground for African literary harvest. On this note, African writers often deploy the tropes and motifs of migration to elucidate and explicate the informing hopes and impediments experienced by migrant characters, both at home and abroad.

An Interface Between African Literature and the Theme of Migration

The emergence of African literature as a distinct corpus of imaginative work of art represents one of the most notable developments in the world literature. As distinct aesthetic representation of the historicity, culture, yearnings and aspirations of a given people, the African literature has always put in place the "social context as its referential and basis of intelligibility" (Akwanya 1). From its immemorial beginning in oral form to what has come to be widely regarded as modern African literature, the corpus has been traditionally functional; thus creative writing, in whatever genre or form, is constantly tailored towards achieving this artistic functionality. Tanure Ojaide stresses this further when he observes that "in African tradition, literature tends to be utilitarian rather than art for art's sake" (41). For art to be utilitarian therefore, certain functions nay obligations ought to be ascribed to the African artist/writer who ultimately lays claim to the artistic and creative ingenuity of the imaginative work of art.

Ascribing social responsibility to African writer of the English novel has consistently been the preachment of most literary critics and social commentators. Many writers and critics of African Literature have persistently voiced their concerns, at different fora, on the need for an African writer to rise to the occasion and champion a cause. In his earlier prescription for the emergent modern African writer, Sembene Ousmane queries and questions the writer thus: "you want to be a writer; then you must champion a cause" (23). This submission finds echo and elevation in Chinua Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day* when he cautions that, "An African creative writer who tries to

avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary times will end up completely irrelevant" (98). The phenomenon of migration is undoubtedly one such big social issue of our contemporary times consequently, many African "literary productions are often known for their utilization of the motifs and tropes of alienation, disillusionment, frustration and isolation" (Abu Sabe 3) of migrant characters.

The theme of migration has already gained, perhaps still is gaining copious representations in both fictional and non-fictional works across the globe. No doubt, the phenomenon occupies an enormous space in the literary productions of writers and poets, most of whom have channeled their creative energy towards providing their first-hand account of life in Diaspora and beyond. Given their nostalgic parley with the past and obsessive preclusion with the present, these writes have earned for themselves the prestigious nomenclature of 'postcolonial writers'. They are widely regarded as such due to the fact that "in their writing and through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by the colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential" (Ashcroft et al 1).

Postcolonial Literary Theory

In historicizing the emergence and subsequent appropriation of postcolonial literary theory and criticism in literature, Habib observes that "Postcolonial Literature and criticism arose both during and after the struggles of many nations in Africa, Asia, Latin America... and elsewhere for independence from colonial rule" (738). In literary discourse, which is the main concern of this essay, postcolonial criticism sprung in order "to further undermine the universal claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics" (Barry 88), which suggests that a great literature is considered to have timeless beauty and universal appeal/significance. By this claim of timelessness and universality, the liberal humanists apparently "demote or disregard cultural, social, regional, and national differences in experience and outlook, preferring instead to judge all literature by a single, supposedly universal standard" (Barry 88). The liberal humanists in this regard, appear inconsiderate of, and at variance with, postcolonial critics who tend to suggest that "there are cultures around the world where literature is often directly and deeply involved in the political process, not merely as effect but as cause, in a profoundly reciprocal relationship" (Habib 744). To further debunk the so-called universal standard of literature, "postcolonial writers ...create a pre-colonial version of their own

nations, rejecting the modern and contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries" (Barry 88).

Oftentimes, what constitutes the bulk of postcolonial literature are some non-canonical postcolonial texts that consist mostly of theories, novels, short stories, poems and plays which collectively form a sort of counter-canon to the mainstream Euro-American canon. As hallmark of artistic ingenuity and creative dexterity, postcolonial writers/poets fashion and articulate a national narrative of postcolonial identity where the social mission of the narrative is either national liberation (as in the case of Ngugi and Sambene Ousmane), or cultural self-reinterpretation (as in the case of Achebe, Okara and Armah). The writers "are attempting to assert their own visions, tell their own stories and reclaim their experiences and histories" (Giri 13), in literary mode. In other words, post-colonial writers tend to address opposition to imperial forces and seek to define autonomous national identity. Many postcolonial writers have depicted "in their writing and through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by the colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential" (Ashcroft et al 1). They further debunk the Western literary hegemony and demonstrate that "such texts can never form the basis for an indigenous culture nor can they be integrated in any way with the culture which already exists in the countries invaded" (Ashcroft et al 5). Therefore, carefully embedded in the core of postcolonial criticism is the practical application of postcolonial theory to demonstrate the seeming "inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural prominence of postcolonial writing" (Ashcroft et al 11). For example, the "theory of style and genre assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value system are all radically questioned by the practices of postcolonial writing" (Ashcroft et al 11) and its criticism tends to situate such literary works in colonial perspectives and interrogates the response people made of them.

In her *Post-Colonial Literature and Counter Discourse*, Helen Tiffin argues that "because a pre-colonial past cannot be regained and contemporary identity cannot be free of that past the real job of postcolonial criticism is to investigate how Europe imposed and maintained colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world" (207). In this light, postcolonial criticism takes into account of, and clears the space for, literary productions of erstwhile colonized people so that postcolonial texts can be taken seriously, not just because they are masterful, but because they are literary creations that are in one way or the other, respond to colonialism or postcolonial experiences.

Suffices it to say, just like other literary theories, in specific terms postmodernism and post-structuralism; postcolonialism has been a product of various developmental exigencies starting from its time of inception to present.

Having discursively traced the historical evolution, emergence, postulations and tenets of postcolonial literary theory, it becomes convenient to argue that among the principal themes developed by postcolonial fiction are those of migration; exile and alienation; rebellion and political struggles against colonial powers; confusing identities (hybridity); multiculturalism and the establishment of cultural autonomy free from imperial forces. Although many of the aforementioned themes are carefully embedded in the novel under study, given its multi-layered narrative and thematic concern, the paper concerns itself only with the depiction of migration and the experiences of migrant characters in *Americanah*.

Theme of Migration in *Americanah*

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is often considered by literary critics as "a novel of race" (Yerima 59). While the theme of racism features superficially in the text, it does not, in any way, form the central theme nor informs the novel's sustained narrative tempo around which the events and characters are portrayed. Migration, which many postcolonial scholars acquiesce to its endearment as the rippling effects of colonialism, has been identified in this essay as the single most visible thematic element in the novel, *Americanah*. From the character profiles of the individual actors, down to the plot structure of the novel, which undoubtedly covers a much wider geographical areas of Africa, Europe and America; Adichie achieves creative excellence in her artistic depiction of migrant experiences in the novel. She does so by creating two sharply contrasting realms wherein some characters, particularly the likes of Ifemelu and Obinze (the two protagonists in the novel) are celebrated for "making it in life" (Adichie 231) after a brief sojourn in United Kingdom and United States respectively. In the character of Ifemelu readers encounter an intelligent, stubborn and outspoken Nigerian woman who moves to the United States of America to pursue University education. Although she faces some challenges and encounters myriad of difficulties adjusting to the American "ways of life" she eventually becomes citizen, wins a fellowship at Princeton and starts a popular blog about race. On the other hand, Auntie Uju, an intelligent and strong-willed doctor, is genuinely despised for her obsession with migration to the West as viable escapement from societal pressure and its resultant psychological enslavement. However, such individual achievements as

recorded by the duo of Ifemelu and Obinze, we are reminded in the novel, are not without blemish.

One fascinating narrative element in *Americana* is the author's deliberate presentation of two alternate realms. These imaginary worlds are consciously created "where push and pull factors act on postcolonial subjects to result in Migration". They are Nigeria and the United States of America" (Yerima 95). The Nigerian setting, which symbolically depicts postcolonial state, is one inundated with economic hardships and complete loss of fundamental human rights. The United States of America is artistically projected in a utopian fashion with ultimate perfectibility. Being adjudged as post-colonial literary text that interrogates western epistemology of knowledge the novel equally interrogates Edward Said's idea of Binary Opposition ingrained in his seminal *Orientalism*. This binary opposition is pretty much desired in the creative process of the novel, *Americanah* to further underscore the long established Western superiority which for quite a number of years anticipated colonial dependence. For instance, we read in the text that, having explored the minimal opportunities in their native Africa, the two characters, Ifemelu and Obinze, decide to follow up their individual dreams in continental Europe and America respectively. For these characters, the attainment of higher social and economic standard is largely dependent on emigration to the West. Thus, migration seen as an economic escape route is not the answer to psychological fulfillment, as evidenced by Ifemelu's return to Nigeria after a decade-long sojourn in America. She subconsciously exudes hybrid personality that neither accommodates African traditions nor conforms to the borrowed, perhaps an alien American lifestyle.

As clearly revealed in Adichie's narrative worldview, the pull factors which spontaneously act as attractors to the postcolonial characters in the text, beckoning them (Ifemelu, Obinze and Uju) to look towards, hence migrate to the United Kingdom and United States of America include social stability and better opportunities of economic growth. While a combination of these factors could be a significant stimulus for human dignity thus, existential quantifiers, a deeper exploration of the novel reveals otherwise. This is because in their designated places of sojourn which pretentiously exude economic viability and political stability, characters realize that America and Europe are not completely devoid of poverty, criminality and lawlessness, the triple detractors that forcefully pushed them in search of greener pastures. Hence, characters' earlier assumptions and presumptions of utopian Europe and America as "lands of endless opportunities" (Adichie 232), is greeted with dashed hopes and

disappointing realities. Indeed, the grass is not always greener on the other side!

Conclusion

The criticism of African literature remains incomplete without special mention of colonialism and its resultant socio-cultural dislocations, to which migration and slavery are integral parts. Adichie's *Americanah* achieves an appreciative creative excellence given the author's fictitious representation of the phenomenon of migration through the character profiles of Ifemelu and Obinze – the two central characters in the novel. Successive coups and economic woes in the postcolonial state have been identified as the 'push' factors that forced migrant characters to continental Europe and America in search of greener pastures, only to discover, perhaps to their greatest surprise and dismay that 'all that glitters is not gold'. The disillusionment as a result of a realization of the artistic truth of the unrealistic façade presented of America and the West is just one of the numerous effects on the postcolonial individuals.

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