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Women's Migration and Diaspora: A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

Migration is one of the distinguishing features of mankind that started from the very beginning of their appearance in the universe. With the development of modern means of transport and communication, thousands of people in each country—especially from the third world—started to leave their usual abode in search of new jobs and opportunities. As a result, the figures of migrant identities have emerged and gained immediate prominence in the wider spectrum of migration phenomena that seems to affect every corner of the globe. Apart from all this, women's migration and multicultural diaspora gained a new prominence in the literary theories of migration, where women are seen to reconfigure their identities. This research study undertakes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and aims to focus upon the challenges faced by female African immigrants. The research also set out to reveal Adichie's vision on how female African immigrants respond to their experience of colour and gender inequality in relation to the West.

Key Words: Women, Identity, Diaspora, Migration, Multiculturalism

I admire women who live life on their own terms. Not to make a point, but simply because it is the life they want to lead. And often the world doesn't give them the room.

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Introduction

Americanah is a 2013 novel by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for which she won the 2013 National Critics Circle Fiction Award. *Americanah* tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who migrates to the United States to attend university. Upon her arrival, Ifemelu encounters an alien culture that exposes her to a myriad

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of problems from financial constraints to racism, which resulted in her a total sense of existential crisis. Along with other female immigrants, we get to see their disadvantaged positions as women. However, resistance to foreign domination is seen to be projected through the female protagonist here. So the research study as a whole examines various challenges faced by female African immigrants in America and Britain as reflected in this novel. The different experiences of female African immigrants' expose how key factors like gender biasness, racism, cultural and economic backwardness affect their immigrant status. Thus this study attempts to show how these women strive to create awareness amongst each other in order to liberate themselves from such oppressive structures.

Analysis

Americanah is an exemplary that subverts the notion that African women are inferior and voiceless. Therefore, this research is underscored via the theoretical discourse of African feminism. Chimamanda Adichie leans towards a feminist perspective by describing the complex nature of female African immigrants in America. While doing so, she attempts to voice for the plight of African women and at the same time advocates the need to free them from all sorts of gender oppression.

The primary aim of this research work is to provide a clearly spelt out vision on African immigrants. The research study shows how the idea of migration may serve as a kind of liberation for women via interrogating the challenges faced by female African immigrants in the West as reflected in Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Americanah*. In this regard, other writings about African immigrants were reviewed. Linda Yohannes in "A Postcolonial Look at African Literature: A Case Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Works" focuses on Adichie's works from a postcolonial perspective. In analysing Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Thing Around Your Neck*, she discusses how the theory is concerned with making a positive turn in the human race through resistance to racism. Again in his review of *Americanah*, S. Sabo provided an in-depth analysis of *Americanah* by giving a brief outline of the novel. S. Sabo pointed out that Chimamanda's manner of discussing race issues through the blog features is brilliant. Then in a review to this novel, Emily Rabateou refers to the challenges of being an immigrant. Emily pointed out that "Beyond race, the book is about the immigrants' quest; self-intervention, which is the American subject. *Americanah* is unique among the booming canon of immigrant literature of the last generation . . ." This review by Emily Rabateou is of importance to this research study for it helps build on the throne of racism as one of the challenges faced by African immigrants and how it impacts both male and female characters in various ways.

Migration is essentially a life changing experience for people immigrating to a foreign nation that contains foreign customs, family values and structures, language and laws. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a new perspective where she views migration in terms of black women as a liberating effect upon them as it occurs primarily through the uprooting of

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old world beliefs and values by exposure to new world ideas. The multicultural America that we all know today would not have been made possible without the signing of the Immigration and Nationality Act by President Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1965. This act presented a historic turning point in American history as America opened its doors to welcome huge groups of immigrants from around the world. As a result of the social change, immigrant families were presented with a country that no longer maintained the traditional family structures that required the women to stay within the domestic context. In their attempts to assimilate into American society, immigrant families experienced a breakdown in traditional patriarchal order. However, the effects of this breakdown did not have the same positive effect for men, as it did for women. As men lost their traditional modes of power, women started to gain more power and autonomy in both their public and private lives through these social changes. Social change in America evidently impacted the lives of immigrant women, as their traditional domestic roles were no longer the only occupational opportunities available to them. To immigrants, America represented a nation of opportunity and freedom that was not available to them.

The question of African immigrants has been a subject of great debate on a global level. This research study contextualises racial and ethnic identities in shaping African women's lives in America. While the literature on black immigrant groups has posited that ethnic identities are often deployed to shield black immigrants from racism, the research undertaken here with reference to the novel *Americanah* also posits that how for some African women, their racial and ethnic identities are viewed as potential sources of discrimination.

Americanah foregrounds the struggles of Ifemelu and her attempts of coping in a racist world. As a student of Nsukka University, Ifemelu's studies have been constantly interrupted as a result of chronic lectures' strikes in a Nigerian government riddled with corruption. In order to solve the problem of missing out on her studies, her aunty Uju based in America arranger for her to get a scholarship, and she, therefore, leaves Nigeria for America with the hope of better education prospects. As we find in the novel, from the very onset Ifemelu encountered racism in America. Back in Nigeria, Ifemelu was oblivious of her black colour, and it is only upon arrival in America that she becomes aware of her blackness. This argument can be substantiated when Ifemelu says:

I came from a country where race was not an issue. I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America. (290)

This instance is suggestive of the dominant race factor in America. Along with skin colour, other facial features like hair, eyes and nose determines race. In *Americanah*, 'hair' is a controversial topic since it is used as a form of discrimination. African women have been denied opportunities because of the texture of their hair. For example, aunty Uju had to take her braids out when she went for job interviews, and then Ifemelu was also forced to undo her braids in order to attend an interview. This is a form of racism that is intertwined with

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stereotyping. The argument here is that one's hairdo has nothing to do with their performance, and therefore the emphasis not to wear braids is a stereotype that is placed mainly upon the African women.

The figure of a black migrant identity cannot escape the 'blackness' which subjects them to be the object of discrimination in the eyes of the White people. In case of Ifemelu, she experienced the burden of racial discrimination during the school career fair when she hoped to be recruited for a job. The contrary happens and her explanation for this is that the recruiters upon realising that she is non-American, but rather an African ended up being non-committal. According to her, their main fear is if they hired her, they would have to "descend into the dark tunnel of immigration" (201). This instance is a clear indication regarding the precarious condition of a female African immigrant.

Chimamanda Adichie's manner of discussing race issues through her protagonist's use of 'blog' is praiseworthy. In the novel we find how Ifemelu tackles the issue of institutionalised racism through her blog posts. One of her posts reads:

... but racism is about power of a group and in America, it's the white folks who have the power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans and mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they are not smart enough to be doctors ... (327)

From this excerpt, it is clear that government organs are portrayed as totally biased and in favour of the whites. Top most institutions like the banking sector are also prejudiced towards blacks since they give loans and mortgages to white people only. So we can make out that through *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives us a vision to the reality of African people. In regard to African immigrants, Adichie has a philosophy that if African immigrants follow the proper immigration procedure, the West may not be such a hostile place as experienced by most characters. Aunty Uju and Ifemelu are good examples of immigrants who used the proper procedure to get to America. It is clear they had legal documentation and so in this case although confronted by several challenges like racial discrimination, their stable and secure status enables them to search for jobs. In case of aunty Uju, we witness how she had to face gender discrimination back in her homeland which forced her flee to America. In consequence, she ends up in this new space liberating herself from male superiority by pursuing her career successfully. Aunty Uju initially got into a relationship with Bartholomew, a Nigerian man who exploits her physically as well as financially. Aunty Uju walked out of this relationship and is lucky enough to find love in Willow. Thus, migration served as a positive factor in the life of Uju as she has been successful

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to come out of the domination of patriarchy.

America as a country presents challenges in terms of female African immigrants retaining their African culture and embracing American culture. The only way for immigrants to fit in is by acculturation resulting in the erosion of African culture. Ifemelu on arrival in America is perplexed by the observations she makes which are indicators of individuals straddling between two cultures. This is seen in language, names and lifestyle. Her aunty Uju while in Africa was a true image of an African woman but upon meeting her, Ifemelu is shocked to discover the American experience that has completely transformed her. She is shocked to hear her aunty identify herself over the phone by pronouncing her name as “you-joo” instead of “oo-joo” (*Americanah* 9).

The most challenging issue for all black immigrants is race and racism. This matter is tackled by black migrant like aunty Uju and Ifemelu quite well. In case of Ifemelu, in order to dismantle the ideas of racial discrimination faced by black people, she sets up a blog. This becomes the most powerful tool in confronting racism in since it acts as a form of resistance that rejects stereotyping of Africans. By posting blogs on white racist attitudes she makes a mockery of them through reversals in that the attention shifts from black to white. She subverts the order by ‘othering’ them not by stereotyping them as they do to Africans but in response to their racist attitude. The blog is used as a mode of communicating among black people urging them to resist stereotypes. It also acts as a platform for forming alliances that allow blacks to share their experience, which provides them with a sense of belonging and solidarity. The blog plays a therapeutic role in that the posts dissect and analyze experiences ranging from racism to hair issues. Ifemelu ends up gaining voice and speaks for people of African descent especially women in the space of America. Ifemelu changes the conversation of African immigrants from being victims of racism through reversals portraying whites as racists. She lets the African woman speak for herself and not be spoken for by the white female. Through Ifemelu the African woman gains agency, this in itself is transformative.

In *Americanah*, Adichie created characters that migrate from Africa to the West and then faced challenges as immigrants. In a way, Adichie has been able to create awareness on experiences of immigrants in a global context. The fact that her female characters end up not as victims, but victors when faced by these challenges indicates the positive impact of migration upon women. Adichie creates space for women agency and subverts the stereotypes of Africans under Western eyes.

Conclusion

This research study is sought to examine the challenges undergone by female African immigrants in America. Ifemelu takes lead to respond to these challenges by subtle resistance like attacking racist attitudes through blog posts. She sets up the blog which she uses to attack white superiority. She critiques their mannerisms, hypocritical nature and is able to create a forum to share experiences getting the worldview on racism. The nature of whites

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stereotyping Africans is challenged by the African immigrant characters in forums like the African Students Association where they speak on the need to be proud of their African identity. So it can be said that Adichie leans towards an African feminist standpoint that advocates for a complementary male-female relationship and that she has a clearly spelt out vision on African immigrant.

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