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Examining Diasporic Experiences in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah

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Abstract

Nigerian diaspora has one of the largest African immigrant populations of the world. The Trans-Atlantic trade and colonialism has caused population shift in the country. Nigerian literature encounters Nigerian migration to the United States and the United Kingdom. Exploring Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, the research paper discusses the diasporic experiences present in the novel. *Americanah* explores various topics like immigration, gender, race and education in it. Adichie points out the inequality prevalent in the society and prejudices towards the black in the novel. She narrates her views through conversations, characterizations and Ifemelu's blogs. *Americanah* is about the Nigerian girl Ifemelunamma who migrates to US to attend university. Adichie's characters are Nigerian socio-economic people who leave their homeland seeking better opportunities and make dreams come true. The diasporic experiences are well brought out in the novel through Ifemelu's characterization. Ifemelu tries to blend in American

society to become an American. She struggles between the two cultures and to keep alive her own identity. The research paper analyses the diasporic experiences of the protagonist Ifemelu in its relevant context.

Key Words: Diaspora, black, homeland, migration, identity

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist. Her third novel *Americanah* published in 2013 is about a young Nigerian encountering racism in United States. The novel won 'National Book Critics Circle Award' for fiction. It was selected by the editors of the New York Times Book review as one of the ten best books of 2013. Also, in 2017 the novel was picked as the winner for the 'One Book, One New York' program. The term diaspora comes from the Greek word meaning 'to scatter about'. The people of diaspora disperse from their homeland to get placed across the globe, spreading their tradition and culture wherever they go. African diaspora describes the huge dispersion of people from Africa during the Transatlantic slave trades starting from the 1500s. The African diaspora took millions of people from African regions throughout America and other nations. Ifemelu, the protagonist is from a middle-class family in Lagos. The situation in Nigeria leads her to America to pursue her higher education in a university. After years she finds homesick for her own country and for her high school boyfriend Obinze. The novel traces her life in both countries intertwined with her love story.

Diasporic Experiences

Migration and issues related to it are predominant themes in Nigerian diasporic literature. The issue of identity is the common factor related with the migration issue as recognized by Diasporas. The common element behind this identity crisis in an alien land is the assumption connected with skin color. *Americanah* deals with the diasporic problems like immigration and its effects on the characters. The novel emerges as a new discourse on

the importance of borders on a global level. It also portrays the exploration of diasporic experiences across national borders. Adichie in the novel *Americanah* portrays the struggles of migration through her characters. The novel reveals a different dimension of how Nigerians get their identity formation in the West. Adichie through her protagonist Ifemelu exhibits the challenges of a middle-class girl and her difficulty in getting the education in another country.

The novel is about the two lovers Ifemelu and Obinze who grow up as teenagers in Nigeria. At that point of time the country is under military rule and people seek to leave their country and move to other places. Both lovers are united but when Ifemelu moves to US, Obinze could not leave with her. Aunt Uju helps Ifemelu and also arranges for her scholarship in US. In her blog “Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those formerly known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black”, Ifemelu writes about the challenges, practical problems and issues faced by African American blacks and non-American blacks in the US. Like Ifemelu, her boyfriend Obinze also faces hardships in London as an illegal immigrant. They both are separated by time and distance. They encounter traumatic experiences while in pursuit of identities. Finally, Ifemelu and Obinze unite when he decides to leave his wife and child to continue his life with Ifemelu.

The novel focuses on various themes especially the theme of identity when Ifemelu and Obinze try to find their place in the world. Due to their circumstances, identity is linked to national and racial identity for both Ifemelu and Obinze. Obinze faces a challenging experience while trying to adapt in England. While his visa expires, he takes on other’s identities and jobs to get a green-card. The situation makes Obinze feel worthless and when caught he is deported back to Nigeria. He eventually gives up his old dream of America and builds a new identity for himself in Nigeria. He gets a

huge success by making a lot of money and marrying a beautiful woman. This lasts for him till Ifemelu returns. Ifemelu after facing her own identity crisis returns to Nigeria and connects with Obinze.

Symbols like Ifemelu's mother's hair that represents one's cultural and individual identity as a means of oppression and racism is used in the novel by Adichie. Ifemelu is a middle-class girl and she finds frequent visits of her friends and relatives from Nigeria. They all practice Nigerian tradition and she always feels connected with these customs and practices. This finally serves as a reason for her come back to Nigeria. Though she leaves to us for further higher education she undergoes self-identification in abroad. She always has liking for her mother's thick and black hair. When people ask Ifemelu, "Is it your real hair?" (Adichie, 2013) she wants to have it like other Nigerian people. She thinks it makes her a true Nigerian and feels it tis dead if the curls are disappeared. When there is a pressure on her that her hair has to be straightened this refers to the racism prevalent in American system. "Just a little burn," the hairdresser said, "but look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing." (Adichie, 2013) Ifemelu in America after encountering problems becomes a blogger. Her life is defined by the obstacles she faces when she goes through to find her identity.

Ifemelu always preferred to speak Igbo, the Nigerian language instead of mannered English. "But his mannered English bothered her as she got older." (Adichie, 2013). She liked to speak Igbo, her mother tongue, with her father and also when in us. She teaches Igbo to Dike and

converses with him in her language and thus tries to maintain her identity of being a Nigerian. Ifemelu lands in trouble when she leaves her homeland. She changes her name thinking that this would fetch her a nice job. When she gets back her name later in the ID card, she then believes she got back her identity. Nigger, the controversial word is seen in Ifemelu's class. "Nigger is a word. That exists. People use it. It is a part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out."

(Adichie, 2013). Though the American vocabulary is not significant the above statement shows how Ifemelu is forced to go far away from identity and adapt American accent. At one-point Ifemelu understands “she was speaking like that because of her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling”, (Adichie, 2013). In the beginning, she tries to speak American accent like other immigrants do but later decides not to get a fake identity and stops it. Though she succeeds in her American accent after a telemarketer compliment, she stresses that she is at heart still a Nigerian. She does not see herself as an American and the telemarketer’s remark does not make her value Americanness over Nigerianness. Thus, she embraces her genuine self as a real Nigerian girl.

Ifemelu finds that black Americans get less privilege in the American identity. They only treat Africans as black Americans and this discrimination is suffered by other characters too like Aunty Uju and Dike. 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.” (Adichie, 2013). According to the novel America is a symbol of wealth and hope but Ifemelu later realizes that it is a mere lie and everything comes with a great price. Ifemelu’s Americanization is gradually seen in the novel when she learns the accent and tries to adapt the things around. She commences a blog to explore the racism in America. Having adapted the American slang and the way of encountering problems she is called Americanah when she returns to Nigeria. Though she doesn’t accept this way of addressing her, it is evident that years of stay in America has changed Ifemelu. The novel examines blackness in the countries involved in Americanah: Nigeria, America and Britain. Adichie skillfully renders Ifemelu’s diasporic experiences as a stranger entering a new culture along with the struggles of racism, relationships and identity crisis.

Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie covers three countries, leaps through various cities, and lives of characters with their relationships. The characterizations and situations of the novel shows the forces that work upon the creation of a person's identity: cultural, economic and racial in addition to personal and preference choices. Though Ifemelu has an American liking she still likes to preserve her own culture. The research paper concludes that the American novel portrays the identity crises of diaspora, their experiences through their life accounts and the limitations exhibit the opportunities and prejudices of diasporas. Thus, the diasporic experiences of the characters in the novel are analyzed through the lenses of recognition and identification in the backdrop of racial and class aware conventions.

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