

Migration Factors and Diasporic Disillusionment in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

Every field of study has enormous roles to play in the quest for good governance and measures towards curbing social vices in society. Each Nigerian literary writer has to pay attention to the experiences prevalent in and peculiar not only to Nigeria but also Africa at large, exposing corrupt practices, impunity, mayhem, erratic economy, epileptic power supply, human trafficking, upward Western migration and myriad of issues plaguing the continent. If the status quo must change, the utilitarian value of literature to reflect and refract the society should come to play. Literary writer must be a chronicler of events and a theorist of permutations geared towards development. This study sets to examine Chimamanda Adichie's genius in(ter)vention in socio-political realities in Nigeria as mirrored in *Americanah*. Eclectic literary survey of postcolonial, socio-cultural and political creeds forms the theoretical framework on which this paper is predicated. Social life in Nigeria is in the state of comatose—nothing goes well—everything is at the verge of collapse. It is characterised by unfriendly socio-political and economic atmosphere. The outcome is massive migration of Nigerians in search of better life. Paradoxically however, cross border-politics, ethnocentric prejudice and racial discrimination are issues Nigerians face in the diaspora. It is recommended that Nigerians should stay in Nigeria and offer themselves to the supreme change needed.

Keywords: Disillusionment, in(ter)vention, impunity, diaspora.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether migration is voluntary or forced, it is often caused by a range of circumstances. While some migrants may flee because of political upheaval and persecution, others may become exilic due to socioeconomic turbulence. The unprecedented exodus of Nigerians to European nations in the twenty-first century is not unconnected with infrastructural decadence, dwindling economy, erratic power supply, incessant attack by the insurgents coupled with the concomitant corruption syndrome enshrined by the Nigerian political-class. These have eaten deep into the ethos of the Nigerian political system. The effects are brain drain and the vulnerability of Nigerians to chauvinistic treatment in the diaspora. Many a time, it is a double jeopardy for Nigerians in the diaspora – hardship at home and disillusionment abroad. Nigerian writers are more committed to using their arts to depict the reality of these excruciating predicaments with serious tenacity aimed at refracting the society from its dastardly state to a more habitable place. From her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2006,) to *Americanah* (2013) purposively selected for

this study, Chimamanda Adichie has established herself as an accomplished writer who understands the necessity of art-for-life's sake – the utilitarian value of art in the exposition of vile events and the feasible way forward. This paper analyses Adichie's in(ter)vention in social inadequacies in Nigeria and, by extension, the diasporic disillusionment Nigerians contend with. Eclectic literary surveys of postcolonial, socio-cultural and political creeds form the theoretical framework of the study with the interplay of analytical research methodology.

Adichie explores spheres of life previously unexplored, which earlier authors are quiet about. She writes about what is and goes farther to tell what should be, inventing an exciting story spiced with literary aesthetics seeking to assert attitudinal change. It is a novel about social realism: postcolonial disillusionment, migration and attitude to race – spanning three continents and touching on variant issues such trans-cultural identity, loss, loneliness, etc. *Americanah* presents the story of Ifemelu, the central character, a spirited young lady with firm ambition, and her boyfriend, Obinze, with whom she grows up

romantically in literature-nurtured-mind under the influential works of Graham Greene, Mark Twain and James Badwin. With all literary grandeur, *Americanah* appeals to the intellect so much that it would make prospective migrants have a rethink and/or change of perception.

Exposition of the Anguish of Nigerians in *Americanah*

Adichie exposes array of problems confronting Nigerians, issues provoking intention to leave the country. Real names of political gladiators, identifiable locations and events peculiar to each person's life and time are the striking realistic features of the novel. Adichie would make one believe that Nigerian leaders take the country as their personal property and unleash terror on the citizens. They form allies with the bourgeoisies locally and internationally to siphoning public fund via obnoxious policies. The state of Nigeria, like a nation on the tide, calls for serious concern and an innovation in the rendition of literary works soon after independence. As typical of postcolonial Nigerian fictional works portraying the realities of events in the country, *Americanah* captures the responsibility an African writer undertakes in the face of these challenges, reaffirming Irele's (1990) observation that the African writer modifies his stance and adjusts to angle of perception to take account of these political and social realities that began in the wake of African independence to impress themselves more closely upon the general attention through the entire continent.

This is borne out of the submission that literary work does not evolve in a vacuum. Indeed, Fwangyil (2011) corroborates this stand, stating that Literature is a mirror of the society and that it draws from human experiences in order to give true reflections of realities in the society. This social influence in literary production gives way to verisimilitude otherwise known as make-believe. The writer, as Kehinde (2005) postulated, is not only influenced by the society but he influences it. Socio-political and economic events in the society shape, direct and influence literary production. A number of things happening in Nigeria are in sharp contrast to acceptable standard in developed countries. From Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) down to the contemporary time, social realism endures as the *modus operandi* on which African novel rests. Kehinde (2005) asserts the significance of social realism, affirming that "...the novels from this region, like those from other regions, are not produced from a void; rather, they are reactions and counter-reactions to socio-political events". African literary writers, which Adichie belongs, focus on oppressive and dehumanising situation – real life events – which they brought creative ingenuity to bear upon. Adichie is not oblivious of her responsibilities. Through a character named Chief in *Americanah* she captures the behaviour of a typical Nigerian politician thus:

I was Babangida's friend. I was Abacha's friend. Now that the military has gone, Obasanjo is my friend....Because I have friends. By the time you know it, I would have taken a position and I would have benefited from the arbitrage. That is our free market!...The corporation was set up in the sixties and it owns property everywhere. The houses are all rotten and termites are eating the roofs. But they are selling them. I'm going to buy seven properties for five million each. You know what they are listed for in the books? One million. You know what the real worth is? Fifty million....Make sure it looks as if you are following due process. You acquire the property, sell off half to pay your purchase price and you are in business! You'll register your own company. Next thing, you'll build house in Lekki and buy cars and ask our hometown to give you some titles and your friends to put congratulatory messages in the newspapers for you and before you know, any bank you walk into, they will want to package a loan immediately and give it to you....That is how Nigeria works (26-27)

This excerpt shows how Nigerian leaders acquire public property crookedly and waste money on irrelevances, paying pimps exorbitantly to woo strumpets "for the army officers" during "Abacha's government" (28). No sector of the country is free from malpractices. Elections in the country are characterised by fraud and bloodshed. "The country is starved of hope" (46) as cars are in queue at patrol stations in one of the world's oil-rich countries. Pensioners are not paid and lecturers embark on strike almost always. Brilliant indigent students drop out of school. In the words of the writer, Nigeria is plundered into a "nation of intractable sycophancy" (48).

Adichie uncovers the level of decadence virtually in all government institutions. Competent people do not want to go into the teaching profession because teachers are poorly remunerated. The standard of education in the country deteriorates so much that "the mathematics teacher...did not know how to solve simultaneous equations" (66). Doctors go on strike because their salaries do not commensurate with the essential services rendered while Universities lecturers cannot boast of modern research materials for their jobs nor a befitting teaching and learning environment.

Ezechi and Abalogu (2010) quoted Isidore Okpewho, a renowned Nigerian literary icon, novelist and critic formerly in the University of Ibadan but lived in the diaspora, admitting that:

Some of us living outside Nigeria left home under rather difficult circumstances. Of course, it would seem ideal to remain at home to do the

kind of studies I do. But living in the United States has afforded me the library and the supplementary resources for my work that I severely lacked in the conditions prevailing in Nigeria at the time I left (46)

The consequences of the hardship on ordinary Nigerians are legion: psychological imbalance characterised by depression, self-defeat and aggression, commercial sex work, etc. Adichie rightly identifies the plight of many Nigerians as she states that “the problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be...”(77) in terms of job placement. One is bewildered, reading about students in a Nigerian University, depicted in *Americanah*, “hurry to the bathroom, to collect water...before the tap stopped” or female students who “squat over the toilet before it became unbearably full” (90). Many a time, the toilets are “already swirled with maggots” (90). A person from the world benchmark Universities cannot but wonder how Nigerians endure an academic calendar marred by incessant strikes or a situation where “there had been no light for two weeks” (159). Writing in strict compliance with the principle of social realism, Adichie has no hesitation naming the Nigerian leaders responsible for these woes. She makes bold to say that “I blame Buhari and Babangida and Abacha because they destroyed Nigeria” (218). The three were military Heads of State and dictators who promulgated draconian laws accompanied and obnoxious policies. According to Adichie, it is on record that “General Buhari’s government stopped giving essential commodities” (281) to students. Little wonder that “people danced in the streets because Abacha had died” (232).

Standard of living worsened so much that a graduate with good honour degree could roam the street for years seeking employment, travelling ‘to Lagos and to Port Harcourt and to Abuja to take assessment tests...attended interview...but then a long empty silence would follow’ whereas, ‘people who did not have second-class upper degree and did not speak as well as he did’ (233) would get job. Criticism of the government about ‘money stolen, contracts uncompleted, infrastructure left to rot’ (468), yield no result. Stealing becomes an established norm in the Nigerian public offices, making it difficult for one ‘to be a *clean* official in this country’ (468). Corruption has eaten so deep in the heart of the nation that the rich are celebrated not minding the sources of their wealth. Nigeria degenerates into an acquisitive society where corruption is institutionalised and people are rated in terms of what they own but not in terms of who they are. The worst is, in Adichie’s view, that corruption is approved by all and sundry with expectancy effects. ‘...people want you to steal. Your relatives want you to steal; your friends want you to steal’ (468). Corruption wrecks the education sector so much that a chauffeur with credit passes in ‘WAEC...cannot spell boy and cat’ (469) correctly. A

number of certificates in the country are not true reflection of the academic competence of the holders. These problems and many more plaguing the country make Nigerians relocate to America and other European countries for better life. Consciously or otherwise, ‘Nigeria is chasing away its best resources’ (100). But, don’t these Nigerians face perilous challenges in the diaspora?

Disillusionment in the Diaspora Mirrored in *Americanah*

Adichie seems to share Olaniyan and Quayson’s (2007) view that a literary writer is a questioner and implacable critic of mores, attitudes, myths of the society and (s)he is an exponent of the aspiration of the people, someone having the responsibility of articulating the yearnings of the people. This assertion reflects significantly in *Americanah*. As common with postcolonial writings, it portrays the disillusionment of Nigerians in the diaspora. Before independence and the pre-civil war eras, Nigerians who travelled abroad did so in pursuit of higher education. Staying overseas more years after the completion of the programme was unusual, except if the degree programme the candidate was pursuing called for a longer duration which, in most cases, was quite understandable. Upon return, fanfare and masquerading were the usual ways to herald the arrival of a returnee from any overseas trip. Those were the days Nigerians acquired skills abroad and returned home with the aim of transforming the nation with the skills acquired.

Since the Nigerian civil war experiences, many Nigerians have chosen to stay out of the country. The general assumption in the present-day Nigeria is that it is easy to make it abroad whereas those who stayed overseas after the completion of their academic programmes in the past were seen as *failures*. Nigerians in the diaspora this day are trained, skilled and professional individuals, contributing immensely to the economic growth of their host communities. Worse still, those who are not skilfully trained still prefer to go abroad to do any job they may be offered no matter how menial or odd it is. They too complement the developmental growth of already developed countries.

Through *Americanah*, Adichie has revealed real nature of diasporic life. Many Africans abroad live miserable life in city slums and suffer racial bigotry especially in America. It is revealed that America is not a heaven; there are filthy places in the States as they are in Nigeria. ‘New heaven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage’ (4). These are the areas the black can secure accommodation because they are being discriminated against. America is, as Adichie would make us believe in *Americanah*, a country where anybody having dealings with the blacks is looked down upon. A number of Nigerian master’s degree holders resort to driving taxi

in America. They take up all sorts of fictitious names to hide their identity and bury their shame. Some Nigerians who left the country for America desperately resort to Sizwe Bansi's life as portrayed by Fugard (1973). They live on other persons' identity and 'social security card' (106), dying figuratively so as to live. Ifemelu becomes Ngozi Okonkwo while Amara's cousin works with Amara's identity card. This explains why many Nigerians abroad will not return home for years. These Nigerians live in

...bleak houses in America, their lives deadened by work, nursing their careful savings throughout the year so that they could visit home in December for a week, when they would arrive bearing suitcases of shoes and clothes and cheap watches, and see, in the eyes of their relatives, brightly burnishing image of themselves. Afterward, they would return to America to fight on the internet over their mythologies of home, because they home was now a blurred place between here and there, and at least online they could ignore the awareness of how inconsequential they had become (117).

The hardships the migrant blacks face in America is hinged on the colour of their skin. Discrimination against the blacks is everywhere in America: in the school, interpersonal relation, places of work or in respect to accommodation. In the words of Adichie, 'In America, tribalism is alive and well' (184). For instance, Dike's teacher says he is aggressive and be taken to a special school where he would be alone and be treated as a mentally derailed child. The reason for this maltreatment is not far-fetched. He is a black boy. Whenever he does what other white pupils do, he is seen as being daring and unbecoming.

Establishing the disparity between the income of the whites and the blacks, Hersch (2008) noted that immigrant workers with darker skin colour have low pay than their counterparts with lighter skin colour. Such low income is termed market discrimination. Joni states the criteria for employing immigrants to include, among other things, ethnicity, race, country of birth, education, family background, occupation in source country, English language proficiency, visa status, employer's character, etc. Joni's submission that labour market penalty to darker skin colour in the US cannot be attributed to differences in productivity likely gives impetus to the writing of *Americanah*.

Discrimination against the blacks is so evident that patients in the hospitals have disdain for their black doctors. This ugly maltreatment as meted out on Auntie Uju should be quoted from the book than being explained:

...she had gone to the public library the other day, had forgotten to bring out the unreturned book from her handbag, and the guard told her,

'You people never do anything right'....She walked into an examining room and a patient asked 'Is the doctor coming?' and when she said she was the doctor the patient's face changed to fired clay (182).

Studying abroad 'to be a resident doctor is slave labour' (151). If a black doctor trained in America is not spared of racial prejudice in spite of the essential service rendered, one begins to imagine the fate of unskilled black immigrants in the country. Taking care of the aged, helping someone to relax, babysitting, and washing of cadaver are the works a number of unskilled African immigrants do in America. Ifemelu is not an exception. In America, blacks and whites work together but don't play together whereas, in Britain, blacks and whites play together but don't work together. Adichie strikes the discrepancy between discrimination against the blacks in America and Britain:

A white boy and a black girl who grow up in the same working-class town in this country can get together and race will be secondary, but in America, even if the white boy and black girl grow up in the same neighbourhood, race would be primary (275)

It is difficult ascertaining the number of black immigrants in America and Britain. Whoever desires 'to know...would go to all the construction sites....(274) in both countries where they are engaged in hard labour. Some of these blacks dejectedly go into marriage with British or American nationals to get stay permit and earn a living.

CONCLUSION

This study has established Chimamanda Adichie as a distinguished writer whose works focus on relevant areas in the society mostly on which earlier writers were silent. Post-independence anguish at home makes Nigerians travel abroad only to face other serious challenges. It could be inferred from the study that leaving Nigeria to stay overseas because of socio-political crises is not an ideal panacea to the problems besetting the country. It amounts to unpatriotic inclination. Diasporic life is not without its own attending problems. Through social realities, Adichie implores Africans to avoid the tendency of living a life of 'double jeopardy' and, by extension, admonishing the whites to have a rethink about racial discrimination and embrace peaceful coexistence.

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