

Representing Trauma in African Diasporic Literature: An Example of Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

In contemporary times, the subject of trauma is perhaps one of the most globally discussed subjects and as such, maybe the verb "traumatize" has become a mere cliché in both spoken and written discourses across the globe. In fact, it is apparent that exposure to trauma is majorly at the individual level, implying its non-exclusiveness to a particular society or some societies. This means that trauma is a global issue, though, might be perceived variably by different individuals. However, since Literature as a tool for mirroring the society does not do this at the broad societal level only, but also dwells on issues or phenomena that pattern personal experiences of individuals across different societies, several writers, in the past and present times, have studied the subject of trauma in their various writings. In this regard, this paper explores the representation of trauma in African Diasporic writings, drawing copious illustrations from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. By employing the Trauma theoretical approach, this paper attempts a psychoanalytic study of the tough feelings of being an African immigrant, dealing with moving, facing racism, and clashing with new cultures. It also studies how trauma affects personal identity and resilience of an individual, adding to our understanding of these experiences. This study further looks into the areas of cultural and historical gaps, as it unveils some differences between the Third World and the West, as well as shows how literary techniques are beautifully employed in the illustrative text, for the representation of trauma.

Keywords: Trauma, Diaspora, African, Literature

Introduction

Africa is a continent with rich cultural, historical, and ethnic heterogeneity. It has been a focal point for various scholarly disciplines, including History, Anthropology, and Literature. Scholars often explore Africa's complex narratives, traditions, and the impacts of historical events on its societies. However, over the centuries, massive

migration of the African citizenry to other developed continents has been a recurring trend, even though the combination of whatever they carry along remains their identity as Africans—the colour and the culture, among others—which of course are very difficult to navigate or change. In fact, it becomes apparent that many of these African emigrants have lost a sense of what they could become in the ambits of the continent; they probably have lost all hope, as many of them migrate without counting the cost of survival in a strange land, in every sense. According to Fielder (2018) in his research report, "Every year, hundreds of thousands of people from Sub-Saharan Africa leave their home countries with the desire and goal of building a new existence in the European Union. In order to do so, they accept the risks connected to irregular migration." This points to the fact that some of these African migrants are fully aware of the risks strung to their decisions, while others may not. As such, the need to project the possible ugly outcomes of migration to the Western world becomes another major catalyst for Diasporicism in African Literature.

Diaspora refers to the dispersion of a community from its original homeland to various locations globally. Scholars study Diasporic communities to understand how migration, displacement, and cultural interactions shape identities and contribute to the broader tapestry of human experiences. According to Safran (1991), the definition of Diaspora is encapsulated in some 'basic characteristics' of Diasporas. He believes that diasporas are characterized by "dispersal from an original 'centre' to two or more foreign regions", "retention of a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland including its location, history, and achievements" and "the belief that they are not — and perhaps never can be — fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate." Thus, Diasporic literature focuses on these issues, in relation to the affected community or communities of people.

In the context of Africa, Diasporic literature encompasses literary works produced by people of African descent who have experienced migration and dispersion. It explores themes related to the impacts of historical events such as slavery, colonialism, racism and cultural dislocation on individuals and communities. Scholars analyze these texts to uncover the complexities of identity, trauma, and resilience within the context of the African diaspora. While the study of African Diasporicism could examine many other issues associated with it, this study focuses on the representation of trauma in African Diasporic writings, taking beautiful illustrations from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) quoted in Jayne Leopard (2018), trauma is "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. However, a person may experience trauma as a

response to any event they find physically or emotionally threatening or harmful.” Corsini (2002:1019) says that trauma is "the result of a painful event, physical or mental, causing immediate damage to the body or shock to the mind." He further notes that "psychological traumas include emotional shocks that have an enduring effect on the personality, such as rejection, divorce, combat experiences, civilian catastrophes, and racial or religious discrimination" (Corsini, 2002:1019). These various definitions explain how critical the subject of Trauma is as far as humans are concerned. Meanwhile, the emotional and psychological responses of traumatized people to Trauma include denial, anger, fear, sadness, shame, confusion, anxiety, depression, numbness, guilt, among many others (Jayne, 2018). This suggests that many people are prone to experiencing such ordeals, as thousands continuously engage in activities, make deals, and take decisions that leave them vulnerable to the sting of trauma. Therefore, it becomes crucial for everyone to remain vigilant against the factors that contribute to trauma, each in their own capacity.

Trauma Studies

The Trauma studies became prominent between early and mid 1990s. It has its root in the post-structuralist criticism of the 1970s. Trauma studies actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric and the New World's views and structure that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world (Craps and Buelens, 2014).

According to Damjana Mraovic-O'Hare (2022) in his summary of *Trauma and Fiction*:

Trauma studies examine the way in which psychological trauma is represented in language and explores ethnical, cultural and political implications of individual and collective traumas manifested in literary texts... Trauma literature, on the other hand, is defined as texts that are influenced by trauma studies and in which a traumatic experience is presented through a series of stylistic innovations such as disrupted causative and temporal narration, iteration and characters' doubling. Trauma fiction authors explore a wide range of issues such as race, feminism, violence and post colonialism.

This explains the central concern of Trauma studies which is representative of Psychological Trauma and the role of memory in shaping identities, both personal and collective. Cathy Caruth (1996) says, "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, it is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma." This means that trauma could be perceived collectively and could be regenerated as long as life continues to exist. It also suggests that history and trauma are interconnected

experiences that go beyond the boundaries of individuality. For instance, Adichie's *Americanah* does not only centre on Ifemelu's experiences, but also exposes us to the complexities of being an African in a foreign land; that is, how personal narratives intertwine with the socio-political contexts. So, the author employs these characters to embody the traumatic experiences of Africans in the Diaspora to reveal how personal stories intricately interlace with the collective history of a people, thereby helping us to understand the historical and societal trauma of African individuals in the Diaspora.

Trauma and Literature

The nexus between trauma and literature is a significant one. Literature is a tool that projects the socio-cultural, economic, political, historical and even religious realities of individuals and communities of individuals. This denotes that literature does not only explore the innermost experiences of an individual, but also propagates cultural values, teaches moral lessons, entertains its audience, and addresses ills of a society, among its several other functions. However, in relation to trauma, literature analyses the mental health or psychological state of an individual or a group of people through literary studies. It becomes a social tool or platform for obtaining new, fresh, and sharp knowledge about the subject in question, Trauma. This implies that while trauma is an inherent part of every human and societal experiences, literature enhances our understanding and reflection over it.

Meanwhile, the Literary Trauma Theory becomes inevitable, as far as the study of the interface between Literature and Trauma is concerned. The theory seeks to identify 'Trauma texts', that is, texts, that employ intertextuality, repetition, fragmentation, and language manipulation to create meaning due to extreme traumatic stress," (Morrissey, 2016). Explicitly, literary trauma theory looks at how certain texts use tools such as repetition of words, breaking up of a narrative, and playing with language to show the impact of really tough experiences. While these "Trauma texts" try to mirror the confusion and deep emotions that come with trauma, the various uses of these literary tools enable authors to connect their readers to the challenging effects of traumatic events in a more meaningful way. In a similar way, this paper intends to add to the streams of topics on Trauma in African Diasporic Literature; how the topic is reflected and how its representation in the literary works helps us to understand our individual and collective experience in contexts. Meanwhile, scholars like Amy J. Scholz believes that colonialism left a legacy of deep trauma and intergenerational pain for indigenous people, the effects of which are felt even till this day. This paints a void picture of the lasting trauma from colonialism on indigenous people with the term "Legacy" leading us to examine the

lasting and inherited consequence of historical Trauma.

***Americanah*: The Trauma of Navigating Cultures as an African Immigrant**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is probably one of the best African writers of her time. She is renowned for her compelling storytelling and exploration of themes, such as identity, gender, and post-colonialism, among others. Her notable works include *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*. Both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are set against the backdrop of the Nigerian civil war and while the former examines the infliction of trauma in a religious family environment, the latter dwells on the impact of the Nigeria civil war, especially the lasting psychological impact on the affected race.

Americanah, her third novel explores the themes of Trauma in different contexts—that of immigrant experience. Through the adventures of Ifemelu, a Nigerian protagonist in the novel, Adichie captures the agony of an African Immigrant in the United States. Ifemelu's struggles become an internal exploration of the human spirit, caught in disparate worlds, where the collision of identities leaves an indelible mark on the soul. The emotional fallout of displacement, masterfully depicted by Adichie, reverberates throughout the novel.

The character portrait of Ifemelu in the novel exposes our emotions to the weight of Trauma from displacement, identity clash, and battles against different prejudices. It makes the reader imagine the pain of falling out of place in a new country, dealing with who you are and facing unfair treatment because of how you look. Trauma, as displayed in the novel, is not just one big thing; it is like a mix of emotions—feelings lost in a new culture, dealing with hurtful moments every day, and trying how to figure out who you are in a complicated setting like America.

At the first conscious encounter of racism, Ifemelu is reawakened to her racial identity as a black person; something she has never had to worry about while she is in Nigeria. This is evident in her remark when she says: "I came from a country where race was not an issue. I did not think myself as black, and I only became black when I came to America." Ifemelu's personal encounter with racism was when her boyfriend, Curt, takes her to the spa to shave her eyebrows and the woman tells her, "we don't do curly here" (p. 293) until Curt intervenes by threatening to inform the authorities.

In *Americanah*, characters struggle with the deep wounds of identity. Ifemelu, tired of being defined by race, faces the burden of representing something larger. Obinze, displaced in London, loses his sense of self like a man without a shadow. The journey to find oneself in America, as depicted, is aching and seemingly never-ending. The struggle of being both African and black, yet not fitting neatly into

these categories, is evident. Obinze's experience, as an American, underscores the trauma of conforming to societal expectations. These stories reflect the profound challenges of identity, shaped by race, displacement, and societal norms. The novel *Americanah* delicately paints the arduous and ongoing process of self-discovery, capturing the transformative, yet sometimes painful, nature of the journey.

Ifemelu's relationship with Curt sparks surprise among white people due to their racial differences. The trauma she faces is evident in the looks of astonishment and anguish from others, questioning why a white guy like Curt would choose her, an ordinary black immigrant. Ifemelu is aware that her black skin disqualifies her, and the constant scrutiny becomes piercing, making her weary of needing protection as evident in the novel:

...they looked at her with surprise, a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not, and in their expressions was the question "Why her?" It amused strangers on the street, who would see her hand clasped in Curt's and instantly cloud their faces with that look. The look of people confronting a great tribal loss. It was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete's body, the sunny charm and the smell, around him, of money. (p. 292)

The word "usage" in the passage above vividly conveys the societal reaction to Ifemelu's relationship with Curt. Such instances as "looked at her with surprise," "shielded expressions," and the question "Why her?" highlight the perplexity and judgment from onlookers. The description of strangers clouding their faces with a look "of people confronting a great tribal loss" introduces a powerful metaphor, suggesting a collective sense of discomfort or displacement. The careful selection of words crafts a nuanced portrayal of the complexities and biases woven into societal perceptions. This shows the traumatic experiences of Ifemelu and that which is collectively experienced by Africans in cross-racial affairs.

For Ifemelu, the way that race in America intersects with romantic relationships is very important. While in America, she has long-term relationships with a white man and a black man, but she feels that she neither really understands her experience as an African woman. This is especially true when she is in a relationship with a white man and, as described in the quote above, feels at once happy and loved, but also misunderstood and dismissed by others and by Curt himself. She says:

When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and

your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will say we're overreacting, or we're being too sensitive... But we don't say any of this stuff. We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. (Ifemelu, p. 359)

The way the words are used in this statement effectively shows the complicated feelings of being in interracial relationships and the internal struggles the speaker goes through. By saying things like "race doesn't matter when you're alone together" but admitting that "race matters" outside shows the difference between private and public views. The repetition of "we don't talk about it" highlights how feelings are kept quiet because of the fear of not being taken seriously. The speaker is afraid to share their problems with their white partners because they worry about being seen as "overreacting" or "too sensitive," showing how tough it is to keep frustrations to themselves. The speaker's inner thoughts, like "you know what we're thinking," reveal the hidden complexities and annoyances often present in interracial relationships. Using strong language, such as "why the heck should it ever have been illegal anyway?" expresses the intense emotions tied to the historical background of interracial relationships. In simple terms, the language of the passage effectively describes the emotional struggles and external pressures people face in interracial relationships, giving a detailed picture of how race affects personal and social aspects of life.

Another thing worthy of note is the cultural and historical disparities between the Third World and the West. Obinze indirectly touched this in his statement by linking these aesthetic choices to the country's history and the current moment in its economic development when he says:

But of course it makes sense because we are Third Worlders and Third Worlders are forward-looking, we like things to be new, because our best is still ahead, while in the West their best is already past and so they have to make a fetish of that past. (Obinze, p. 539)

The implication that "our best is still ahead" for 'Third Worlders' suggests a hope for progress and improvement, while the statement about the West, "their best is already past," implies a sense of nostalgia or perhaps a cultural trauma associated with a perceived decline. The notion that in the West, there is a need to "make a fetish of that past" suggests a fixation on historical achievements, possibly at the expense of

adapting to the present or looking toward the future. This fixation might be seen as a form of cultural trauma, where a society is overly attached to past glory and struggles to embrace change. This is realised in Ginika's statement thus: *"You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa."* (Ginika, p.160). Trauma is subtly represented through the exploration of names and nicknames, particularly in Ifemelu's experiences as an immigrant. The necessity for Ifemelu to adopt the name "Ngozi Okonkwo" to find work illegally in the United States reflects the traumatic challenges faced by illegal immigrants, where they must conceal their true identities for survival. The act of using a false name is not only practicality but also a symbol of the erasure of one's true self, contributing to a loss of identity—a form of psychological trauma.

In addition, the observation by Ginika that people are "gullible about names" and will believe anything about Africa speaks to the broader societal ignorance and stereotypes surrounding immigrants. This lack of awareness or consideration for the cultural significance of names contributes to a sense of detachment and dehumanization for those experiencing the trauma of immigration. The humor mentioned in the quote serves as a coping mechanism, masking the deeper and darker theme of the challenges faced by illegal immigrants and their struggle for identity in a foreign land.

Another aspect of trauma which is characterized by the need to impress your new community and assimilate with a different culture or society out of fear is seen in the conversation between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu when she (Ifemelu) tries speaking Igbo to Dike, Auntie Uju's son:

Dike, I mechago?" [Have you finished?] Ifemelu asked.

"Please don't speak Igbo to him", Auntie Uju said. "Two languages will confuse him".

"What are you talking about, Auntie? We spoke two languages growing up".

"This is America. It's different" (Adichi, 2013: 109)

The conversation between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu highlights the struggle of African immigrants in the Diaspora to navigate their identities and cultures in a new environment. Auntie Uju's insistence on only speaking English to her son is a reflection of the pressure many immigrants face to assimilate and conform to the dominant culture in their new country. This suggests a fear of being perceived as different or not fully belonging in the American society. This fear can stem from a desire to protect one's children from discrimination or a belief that assimilation is necessary for success in a new country. But, the implication is, prioritizing English

over Igbo, one may feel a sense of erasure of one's own culture and identity, which can be a traumatic experience for immigrants in the diaspora.

In the story, Ifemelu's narrative shows that hair transcends mere aesthetics, it becomes a symbolic battleground where cultural identity, societal expectations, and discrimination collide. Auntie Uju, Ifemelu's aunt, tries hard to blend with the American lifestyle:

I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional. (Auntie Uju, p. 146).

Here, the pressure to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty and professionalism, exemplified by the advice given by Kemi to remove braids and relax hair for interviews, is nothing short of an indication to loss of identity. Auntie Uju's experience reflects the broader struggles of many characters in the novel, emphasizing the political nature of hair in the context of societal norms. This is evident here:

She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be... And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself. He was now a husband and father, and they had not been in touch in years, yet she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness, or that she did not often think of him... (p. 4)

Ifemelu's decision to move back to Nigeria is tied to an intricate sense of homesickness and loss. The choice represents an attempt to anchor herself in a place where she can establish roots without the constant urge to uproot and escape. The ache of loss she feels, as if something has been taken from her, is not only about the physical place but also about a significant emotional connection.

Within this context, Obinze, her first love and lover, becomes a poignant element of her homesickness. Despite the passage of years and the fact that he is now a husband and father, Obinze remains an integral part of her emotional landscape. The unfulfilled connection with him, the longing for a past that cannot be recreated shows a psychological pain of loss. Her thoughts of him become a source of homesickness, as she sifts through their shared history, seeking understanding and grappling with a love that has transformed but remains indelibly linked to her sense

of belonging.

In *Americanah*, the narrative techniques employed by the author effectively depict the trauma experienced by the protagonist, Ifemelu, as she navigates the complexities of being an African immigrant in the United States. Through the use of character representation, multiple perspectives, flashbacks, and cultural signifiers, Adichie delves into the emotional and psychological impact of Ifemelu's traumatic experiences, including discrimination, cultural alienation, and personal identity struggles.

Although Ifemelu is the principal character around whom all the actions revolve and a major representation of Trauma in the novel, yet, the novel also employs other characters like Aunt Uju, Obinze, Ginika and many other characters in showcasing how traumatic past of Africans continues to shape their present reality in America. Through flashbacks to Ifemelu's childhood and early adulthood, readers gain a view into the deep-rooted pain and dislocation she carries from her homeland to the United States, highlighting the lasting effects of trauma on her sense of self and belonging.

Adichie incorporates cultural signifiers, such as language, food, and social customs, to illuminate Ifemelu's quest for healing and reconnection with her African identity. The protagonist's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment is intricately woven with symbolic elements that signify resilience, cultural pride, and the longing for a sense of rootedness in a foreign land.

The interplay of narrative techniques in *Americanah* underscores the profound impact of trauma on individual identity and resilience within the Diasporic experience. By engaging with the complexities of Ifemelu's narrative, readers gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by African immigrants in navigating cultural barriers, confronting racism, and reclaiming their heritage amidst a backdrop of historical injustices.

Through Adichie's masterful storytelling and thematic exploration of trauma, resilience, and healing, *Americanah* offers a poignant and insightful portrayal of the enduring legacy of historical traumas within the African Diaspora, as well as the strength and resilience of individuals striving to find their place in a world marked by cultural diversity and interconnectedness.

Conclusion

In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents a detailed exploration of the trauma and complexity faced by African immigrants navigating cultures, particularly in the context of race, identity and belonging. Through Ifemelu's journey, the novel highlights the emotional toll of adjusting to a new cultural

landscape, where perceptions of race differ from her experiences in Nigeria. This trauma is not only rooted in external challenges—such as racism and the pressure to assimilate—but also in the internal conflict of self-perception and identity. Moreover, *Americanah* sheds light on the resilience of immigrants as they navigate these cultural spaces, while also addressing the ways in which identity is reshaped by the forces of displacement and belonging. The novel invites readers to consider the deeply personal impact of immigration and cultural negotiation, offering a profound commentary on the African immigrant experience.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how past injustices continue to influence African communities and how writers of African descent use literature to navigate and articulate these experiences. The study reaffirms the significance of African Diasporic literature in shedding light on the enduring effects of trauma, while also emphasizing the power of storytelling as a means of resistance, healing, and identity construction.

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