

Postmigration Disillusionment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Jude Dibia's *Unbridled*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the diaspora experience in Adichie's *Americanah* and Dibia's *Unbridled*. It presents the selected texts as creative endeavors that juxtapose the fantasies and realities of migration by Nigerians across Europe and America. Using the Postcolonial tenet of "otherness", this study scrutinizes instances of postmigration disillusionment in the selected texts through a contrastive assessment of the "here" and "there", "home" and "abroad", "developed" and "underdeveloped", etc. The aim of the study is to demonstrate that literature offers a critical insight into the challenges that confront Nigerians in the diaspora. The textual analysis reveals that migration is triggered by the social, political and economic instability in the country. It is also the outcome of bad leadership within postcolonial Nigeria. The escapist approach to these challenges as captured in both texts is a massive relocation of young people who hope for a better life in Europe and America. The texts also illustrate how the high expectations of these migrants are cut short upon arrival in the diaspora and the plethora of new realities that they are exposed to in Europe and America especially as Blacks in a White dominated environment. The paper finds that their eventual choices are, however, not choices of convenience but a case of choosing between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Keywords: Migration, Disillusionment, Diaspora Experience

Introduction

The emergence of Nigerian Diaspora writers has its root in first, the transatlantic slave activities of the late 18th and 19th centuries and also the voluntary movement of Blacks in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries who travelled to Europe in search of greener pastures. This is why migration is considered as voluntary or involuntary movement. Voluntary migration is a deliberate decision which is largely informed by the disillusionment that characterized post independent Nigeria. According to Kehinde (2011:63):

The degree of voluntariness to migrate to foreign lands can be weighed against the backdrop of the absence of an environment capable of offering its citizenry the opportunity for a meaningful existence. As a result, what may, therefore, be described as, voluntary“ may betray a good degree of compulsion, since people are compelled to make choices under the pressure of the absence of basic amenities, security and probable sources of livelihood.

This implies that the voluntary migration in question is not entirely voluntary, because most of the migrants are compelled into the search for a better life by the challenges posed by the disillusionment that confronts postcolonial Nigeria. Whatever the case, it is important to note that as Amit Shankar Saha (2009:186) explains:

“Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them”.

This means that the Diaspora experience is a fertile ground for literary development. However, the thematic concerns of the writings of Nigerians in the Diaspora oscillate between issues emanating from their host land and homeland. This is because the “distress of uprootment and transplantation” is a matter of cause and effect. Thus, their predicament in the host land is often rooted in the challenges that characterise their homeland. This is why the emergence of diaspora writers within the Nigerian literary corpus can be accounted for on the grounds of factors ranging from colonialism to political instability in post-colonial societies. According to Nyitse and Iorhii (2012) “the most dramatic events that have affected the psyche of writers and citizenry in Nigeria and the African continent as a whole, has been colonialism and its aftermath”. They argue that the failure of government made the elite migrate to foreign countries, thus bringing about the second wave of migrations, especially to Britain and the United States America. Kehinde and Mbipom (2011: 63) point out that despite the movement:

The African writer and his craft predictably continue to rise to the challenge of remaining committed to his community in the face of diverse socio-political instabilities and the contending trend of modernization... Specifically, contemporary Nigerian prose fiction continues to witness a tremendous emergence of literary works marked by diverse degrees of creative innovation and experimentation. However, remarkable in the development of this genre is the creative effort of migrant Nigerian prose

fiction writers who project commitment and responsiveness to the socio-political and socio-economic realities of their motherland through their works.

The emphasis here is on “contemporary Nigerian prose fiction”. However, it is important to note that writers have also achieved the same commitment through poetry and drama. For Kehinde, the question of commitment also reflects the affinity and awareness of writers to their socio-cultural heritage. According to him:

This relatively new trend of writings from Nigerians in the Diaspora signals a paradigm shift from the picture of motherland and the numerous creative statements that have been generated internally by writers at home to those in the Diaspora. Since emphases, over the years, have been on the criticism of the socio-political realities of contemporary Nigeria by the home-based writers whose effort and commitment are commendable. (63)

While Kehinde acknowledges that home-based Nigerian writers have made meaningful contributions to literary representations of their natal home, by providing a remarkable foundation for contemporary Nigerian fiction writers to thrive, he also argues that Diaspora Nigerian writers are, no doubt, concerned with their home land. Oluwole Coker and Mohammed Ademilokun (2013:87) also point to the fact that “in Nigeria particularly, the writers are voices who operate from several locations – home and Diaspora, and who constantly revisit themes of the state of their homelands.” They further explain that “even for those permanently located in the West like Chris Abani and Chika Unugwe, their location merely broadened and globalized the intensity of their artistic offerings”. The growing input of Nigerian Diaspora writers has continued to receive critical and scholarly attention. It is in the same spirit that this paper, explores Adichie’s *Americanah* and Dibia’s *Unbridled* to demonstrate the representation of diaspora experience in the Nigerian prose fiction.

Postcolonial Theory as Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that will be adopted in this paper is the postcolonial theory. This is because by definition, the postcolonial can be considered in the light of migration and dislocation. In turn, if migration is a major issue in many national and regional debates and policies, then this is largely because of the influx of migrants to the West from the lesser developed countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America; in other words, from postcolonial nations, whereby issues of class, race, ethnicity and religion feature prominently, as do questions of national purity and contamination, inside and outside, self and other.

Beginning with Frantz Fanon's publications of *Black Skin White Mask* (1952) and Aimé Césaire's *Discours Sur le Colonialisme* in the early 1950s and subsequent publications of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, George Lamming's *Pleasure of Exile* (1960), and Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, the stage was set for postcolonial discourse. Fanon's major call was for Africans to resist Western hegemony by seeking their cultural identity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* published in 1978, largely influenced the growth of postcolonialism. Said drew attention to the stereotypic portrayal of the "third world" countries. For him, the intention was to assert and justify their military and economic dominance over the "Other". Said's call in *Orientalism* is for the literary circle to beam its analytical search light on issues relating to and arising from colonization, imperialism and a deliberate construction of the "Other" for hegemonic and exploitative purposes. This call has prompted issues relating to language, feminism, oppression, cultural identity, race and education as offshoots of colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism. This paper, in this regard, aims to explore Adichie's *Americanah* and Dibia's *Unbridled* by bringing out the concept of the "Other" and its effects on the characters in the texts.

The concept of "Othering" forms the basis of the use of postcolonial theory in this paper. This is a deliberate grouping along racial lines, economic standing and civilization in the Western sense. The colonizers deem it fit to describe the colonized in the category of the "other", they having the task or project of civilizing the colonized. Tyson (2015, p.401) points out that:

The practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called othering, and it divides the world between "us" (the "civilized") and "them" (the "others", the "savages")... . The "savages" were usually considered evil (the demonic other) as well as inferior. But sometimes the "savages" were perceived as possessing a "primitive" beauty or nobility borne of closeness to nature (the exotic other). In either case however, the "savage" remained other and, therefore, not fully human.

Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is another postcolonial text that contributed a great deal to the concept of the "other". Said identifies a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism', which is a particular and long-standing way of identifying the East as 'Other' and inferior to the West. The same difference characterizes the relationship between the Europe and Africa. The postcolonial literary theory discuss experiences of various kinds: migrations, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe, such as history, philosophy, linguistics, and the fundamental experience of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. None of these

is essentially postcolonial, but together they form the complex fabric of the field. Postcolonial concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, the “other”, ambivalence, centre, margin, diaspora, ethnicity, identity, etc. are all relevant to immigrant experience. Concepts more specific to immigrant experience are assimilation or acculturation, transnationalism, fitting in, cultural or identity divided by culture, history and circumstance. These repetitive themes are used haphazardly by immigrant Asian writers to voice their identity crisis, intergenerational conflicts and nostalgia to counterbalance their memories of "past" and "present" and of "here" and "there".

Fantasy versus Reality: Representations of the Diaspora Experience in Adichie’s *Americanah* and Dibia’s *Unbridled*

Nigerian diasporic work of literature like Adichie’s *Americanah* and Dibia’s *Unbridled* embody the experiences of the globally dispersed populations of Nigerians. They project the diaspora reality of most Nigerians in the diaspora, particularly in Europe and America. The African literary tradition has always carved out a space for the representation of Diaspora experience, because it is an offshoot of the socio-political challenges that have engulfed sub-Saharan Africa. Williams (1996: 49) corroborates this when he asserts that:

The crisis of governance and democratization in Africa has left a profound mark on its literature; African writers have played a crucial role in the political evolution of the continent particularly in influencing the turbulent trajectory of the postcolonial state in Africa.

Adichie and Dibia paint a picture of how the socio-economic and political challenges in Nigeria account for the transatlantic movements of Nigerians, even after independence. Their works portray how the Nigerian is disillusioned and displaced in his ancestral home and goes in search of happiness in a foreign land, which is perceived as a home of milk and honey. The consequence of this movement also presents an array of issues which Adichie and Dibia capture in their works. Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), for instance, projects the experiences of Nigerians both at home and abroad. The novel is an expression of the deep sense of disconnection between individual characters and the reality they find themselves, as they travel in search of a better life. The impression is that America offers hope and everyone aspires to achieve the “American dream” and in doing so, they undergo acculturation. Obinze’s love for America, is captured in the excerpts below:

Everybody watched American films and exchanged faded American magazines, but he knew details about American presidents from hundred years ago. Everybody watched American shows, but he knew about Lisa

Bonet leaving *The Cosby Show* to go and do *Angel Heart* and Will Smith's huge depts. Before he signed to do *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "You look like a black American was his ultimate compliment..." (67)

Obinze's commitment to America is portrayed in his interest in their history. His obsession with America emphasizes the value that he places on the country, in contrast to the value that he places on Nigeria and on its cultures and lifestyle. To him, America is perceived as the biblical Promised Land. However, upon arrival, Ifemelu and Obinze struggle to negotiate and identify with the realities of their new environments, because the reality on ground is different from what they had watched on TV or read in books. This world of difference is what necessitates instances of nostalgia and depression in *Americanah*. Ifemelu, for instance, suffers depression as a result of the frustration she encounters in America and eventually returns to Nigeria. Dibia's *Unbridled*, on the other hand, conveys the limitations that Erika the central character suffers as a young girl trying to fend for herself in Lagos and then in Europe. The novel also takes us through her awful experiences in Britain where she goes to in search of a better life. Erika, upon arrival, kept comparing England with Nigeria. Her observation is captured thus:

For some reason, I kept comparing this England with Nigeria. I am sure many foreigners do this when they visit another country, subconsciously cataloguing the differences in surrounding, cultures and habits of the people, trying hard sometimes to discover what it is that makes the other people superior or inferior as the case may be. (p. 40)

Having examined both, Erika begins to question the superiority claim of one race over another. The history of colonialism and its psychological effect, leave most Africans with an inferiority complex. However, Erika soon realizes that no society is perfect and that her expectation were somewhat bigger than what is obtainable in Europe.

Ifemelu and Erika share a similar experience of depression in the diaspora. Their experiences accentuated their personalities as black people and made them act outside the norm. Ifemelu's nostalgia and depression are captured thus:

An early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness...Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze...she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness. (6)

Here, we see a vivid capture of the nostalgic feelings of Ifemelu which eventually lead to the depression she eventually suffers. The reality in America did not correspond with the expectations and hopes she had before leaving Nigeria; thus, a feeling of disillusionment. Erika also faced a similar disappointment in Europe, right from the airport when she meets James her Virtual lover who was supposed to change her life and end her suffering. His appearance and welcome were quite a disappointing reality for Erika. She recounts that she had “expected much more, based on the stories and the perception” she had from “watching movies, reading books and magazines and also from the stories carried over by the more privileged girls she had known (p. 2) but, here she was having to pay her white boy friend’s transport fare from the airport.

Ifemelu and Erika had thought of the West as a safe haven and Whites as a superior race. This is the psychological predisposition that makes Nigerians aspire to a better life abroad. Erika, had hoped Britain would offer her an escape from the socio-cultural oppression often imposed on women in Nigeria. However, her stay in London revealed otherwise. She laments thus:

No one tells you that you are all on your own when you leave your country and head for another man’s land with your foolish dreams and hopeless hope. No one tells you to stop hoping and stop dreaming. Soon enough you find out by yourself. (Prologue, 4)

The diaspora experience is a different ball game altogether for Nigerians, because they are Blacks in white dominated societies with tendencies of racism. Siobhan, James’ friend, for instance, reacts harshly to Erika’s coming to Europe to meet James. He complains thus: “You Africans should really stay back in Africa”. Derek, another of James’ friends also complains that Africans and Indians are taking up all the jobs, depriving Brits of “any decent jobs” (p. 63). Such derogatory comments left Erika ashamed. In another instance, at the entrance of the toilet, Erika, also, recounts that:

There was already a long queue of white women waiting. It was strange standing in this line of white skin. I noticed some women looking at me and then turning away abruptly when I caught their eye. It was almost like I wasn’t supposed to be there. I felt passive hostility for the first time in my life...on a closer look I realised that almost everyone dancing on this basement floor was black or of African descent...it was quite glaring, the apparent racial divide within the room. (65)

This xenophobic treatments made Erika uncomfortable and disappointed. Obviously, in Europe, Erika still suffers from the limitations she thought she escaped from by leaving Nigeria. She finds out the hard way that white men can equally be

domineering and brutal. Bessie points out to her that “the problem isn’t marrying a white man. It isn’t even the motivation for marrying one.” But, “the problem is men” (p. 96). She realizes also that “White men tell lies too” (p. 173). In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s experience with the tennis coach was quite traumatizing and depressing for her. It was the reason behind her disconnection with Obinze. Experiences of such magnitude shape the experiences of the Diasporas and affect their connection with the past. Thus, when the individual, as in the case of Ifemelu, is unable to manage such thoughts, depression sets in. Nostalgia is reflected in Ifemelu’s inability to be her former self. In addition to this experience, she also suffers a lack of job and resources to pay her bills. At some point, she thought of even killing the coach.

She lay rigid on her bed. She could not sleep, she could not distract herself. She began to think about killing the tennis coach. She would hit him on the head over and over with an axe. She would plunge a knife into his muscled chest. He lived alone, he probably had other women coming to his room to spread their legs for his stubby finger with its bitten-back nail. Nobody would know which of them had done it. She would leave the knife sunk in his chest and then search his drawers for his bundle of one-hundred-dollar bills, so that she could pay her rent and her tuition. (p.155)

This excerpt reveals how pressure can lead people into committing crimes. Even in America Ifemelu still suffers the pain of abuse. Ifemelu’s consideration of suicide is a proof of her disillusionment and depressive mood. Suicide is considered as an option for her, when she suffered depression.

She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, she had no energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself.....she sometimes forgot to eat....she no longer went to class. Her days were stilled by silence and snow. (p.156)

Ginika also explains that depression:

“... is something a lot of people go through, and I know it’s not been easy for you adjusting to a new place and still not having a job. We don’t talk about things like depression in Nigeria but it’s real. You should see somebody at the health center. There’s always therapists.” (p. 158)

This illustrates the extent of Ifemelu’s disillusionment as a jobless migrant. These instances are examples of what Nigerians in the diaspora go through in a land they thought held the solutions to all their problems. Both Ifemelu and Obinze in *Americanah* were disillusioned upon arrival, their destinations did not offer the comfort and good life they had hoped for. In fact, they both had to bear the identity of

someone else to escape being deported. While it worked out for Ifemelu, Obinze was caught and deported eventually. Ifemelu suffered depression while in America and even contemplated suicide at some point. With time, she grew nostalgic and eventually decided to return to Nigeria.

In *Unbridled*, Princess' experience in Italy shows a different kind of experience that women in the diaspora suffer, especially when they are illegal migrants. Her refusal to give in to prostitution in Italy, was her way of responding to oppression. Like Uloma, she develops a thick skin against society's suppressive attitude towards single women. Princess' movement to Italy was orchestrated by her family due to poverty. Her trip was to bring them relief and the cost was prostitution. Her resolve to resist the demands of family is a revolt against an oppressive system. As opposed to Princess' action, Ese's relationship with her Madam represents those who voluntarily engage in prostitution to survive in Europe. Prostitution in Turin, Italy, sometimes leads to death, especially for those who are considered as the "other", ugly and misfit to serve customers; they simply become fit as organ donors. (p. 28). These harsh conditions become options that Nigerians dare because of the situation back home. In *Americanah*, For instance, the harsh living conditions during the dictatorial rule of General Sani Abacha, drove many people abroad in search of refuge from military oppression and a better life. The characters hoped that a democratic society will give them the opportunity to achieve their personal dreams and aspirations; it would be a far more prosperous society than a Nigeria under military dictatorship. Obinze for example, proclaims that "America is the future" (70), but the outcome of his stay proves otherwise

The situation in Nigerian also makes the young ones seek education abroad. Through Ifemelu's flash back, the novel portrays the educational instability of the Nigerian system:

Strikes were now common. In the newspapers, university lecturers listed their complaints, the agreements that were trampled in the dust by government men whose children were schooling abroad. Campuses were emptied, classrooms drained of life. Students hoped for short strikes, because they could not hope to have no strike at all. Everyone was talking about leaving. Even Emenike had left for England. Nobody knew how he managed to get a visa. (p. 98)

The "japa" syndrome which has been on the increase in Nigeria is portrayed here. Thus, many of the characters that leave their home land to the West are depicted as escaping from poor political, educational, social, and economic conditions in Nigeria. They all have hopes of living better lives in their host countries. Ginika and

Ifemelu are examples of characters who leave for America in search of better educational opportunities but end up disillusioned.

Safran (1991:83) states that diaspora people “believe that they are not fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it”. This is the case of Obinze and Ifemelu in the text who on coming face-to-face with the America reality, feel alienated from it. The text captures how many Nigerian Immigrants in the novel, with university degrees from their home countries, struggle to get odd jobs which are not always readily available to them. Obinze experiences it first hand when he gets to Europe:

Everybody joked about people who went abroad to clean toilets, and so Obinze approached his first job with irony: he was indeed abroad cleaning toilets, wearing rubber gloves and carrying a pail...the toilets were not bad, some urine outside the urinal, some unfinished flushing; cleaning them was much easier... and so he was shocked, one evening to walk into a stall and discover a mould of shit on the toilet lid, solid, tapering, centered as though it has been carefully arranged and the exact spot has been measured... Obinze stared at the mould of shit for a long time, feeling smaller and smaller as he did so, until it became a personal affront, a punch on his jaw. And all for three quid an hour. (pp. 236-237)

The degrading situation of the Nigerian migrant is illustrated in the above excerpt when Obinze who had left Nigeria with the hope of getting a good job and to eventually finish his postgraduate studies, came face to face with the fact that the England he had been fantasizing about, is different from the real England. He half-heartedly does the cleaning job until he encounters an unsightly mess which brings back his sense of self-worth and he leaves the job. The pursuit of a better education and ultimately a better life sees Obinze and many other migrant Nigerians doing jobs they would be too ashamed to talk about to any relative back home.

The experiences of the character of Erika also reveal that the diaspora experience is, more often than not, a product of a bias and failed system. Erika's experience is quite symbolic, in some ways, of the Nigerian postcolonial experience. The disillusionment that characterises the post-independent Nigeria and the disabled system that followed have led most to search for a better life and for some, a new identity. Princess providence and Erika were exposed to the hardship of a diaspora experience by virtue of their search for a better life. The juxtaposition between the Okoros' wealth and the poor families around points to the power of oppression assigned to the wealthy by virtue of their status in society. These differences are

strong identity markers that determine who gets what in society. Eventually, Erika develops a thick skin against the oppressive system.

As a result of the prevailing issues of poverty, unemployment, social instability, inadequate infrastructure and the poor educational system in Nigeria, as portrayed in Adichie's *Americanah* and Dibia's *Unbridled*, many characters in diaspora, despite their bad experiences in their host land, would rather remain than go back to their ancestral home. An example is Obinze's cellmate who on being deported from Europe to Nigeria said:

"I will take off my shirt and my shoes and when they try to board me. I will seek asylum... "If you take off your shoes, they will not board you." He repeated this often like a mantra. (p.283)

Most of the Nigerians in Adichie's *Americanah* refuse to return home especially, since the condition back home is worse than the one in their host land. The fact that Obinze's cellmate in the above quotation was not one of those to be deported alongside Obinze, indicates that he succeeds with his machination of seeking for asylum in order not to be deported back to Nigeria. We notice the same reluctance from Erika who, despite the red flag that James was not who she thinks he is, decides to still stay in Europe. Though she was deceived, she had a choice of returning to Nigeria as Princess advised; "Don't wait for bad things to happen to you Ngozi, just walk away immediately you smell trouble". She ignored all the warning signs and stayed.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the representation of migration disillusionment in Adichie's *Americanah* and Dibia's *Unbridled*. The texts effectively portray the hardship, scarcity, economic degradation, etc. behind the mass migration of Africans, young and old, to America and Europe. They believed Europe and America are filled with easy money to go around. The novel describes the unlivable nature of the American/British dream for Africans and their unwelcomed status by presenting the hardships of living abroad and the sense of alienation which is caused as a result of being different. Still, the majority of characters in the texts like Emenike, Erika, Auntie Uju, Ese and Obinze's cell mate, would rather be faced with racism, nostalgia, disappointments, culture difference, depression and even becoming a hybridized version of themselves, than coming back to their home of origin ravished by poverty and choked with people just getting by one day at a time.

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