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THE DYNAMIC INTERPLAY OF THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS: A STUDY OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH



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ABSTRACT

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The current phenomenon of globalization enables the movement of people across borders including Africans as well. At no other time has there been such great numbers of African writers in the Western diaspora writing and publishing at the centre for a global audience. The environment, circumstances as well as several other situations in which the writers bring the local into the global space define the 'new African diaspora'. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an acclaimed female African writer, who has taken advantage of her cosmopolitanism to present the reality of her race, ethnic group and her gender at the centre. Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah* presents the challenges and impact of migration and globalization faced by the heroine, Ifemelu and that of several others in the new world. Adichie in the novel juxtaposes the local situations and global realities with each assuming different significations for her characters at profound levels. This exposition is hinged on post colonialism's key terms such as 'hybridity' and 'liminality' as well as Taiye Selasi's concept of 'Afropolitan'. The instances of the interplay of global and local environments in *Americanah* are brought to the fore to advance the construction of new identities of the African migrants. The outcome is such that the global environment is seen to have enabled new identities of migrants now free of confining dictates of the local environment where cultural norms hold sway.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature of new African diaspora fiction by identifying that the change in the identity of contemporary black migrants as presented in the highly critiqued Adichie's *Americanah* is largely due to the dynamic interplay of the global and local environments that the migrants traverse.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last four decades have witnessed the mass movement of several Africans to the West not necessarily fleeing wars and natural disasters but also in search of better opportunities or generally for economic reasons. The writers from the continent have not been left out of the exile/diaspora experience either; theirs is a movement that has put them at the frontier of African literature and their migration is viewed as that from the periphery to the centre or metropole. The implication of this movement is that the writers have seized the opportunity of their presence in the new environment to write about the homeland as well as varying experiences of the hostland.

Making such offerings available for the consumption of Africans and the entire globe amounts to bringing the 'local' to the 'global' and taking the 'global' to the 'local'.

The new writings by African diasporic writers are seen to have given the authors a new and distinct identity. It is an identity Adesanmi and Dunton (2005) have identified as characterized by "multicultural and transnational frame" (vii), and one marked by a generic shift from poetry to the novel genre. This summation is borne out of the fact that the diasporic experience is one that exposes those caught in it to diverse cultures. There are now more fiction writers from the continent than at any other time, all of them engaging with contemporaneity, whether they are located in the West or in Africa.

The new generation of African writers is dominated in number by those in the diaspora according to Murphy (2017) and are "reshaping and renewing the literatures of Europe and North America from different perspectives while extending the range of African literature globally" (94). However, the preoccupation of the new writings still remains largely issues related to Africans at home or in the diaspora as well as the socio-political situation of the continent. One common denominator of African writers irrespective of location is their predilection to expressing issues related to Africans. This same position is also subscribed to by Eze (2013) when she affirms that "Africa and its history have fed much of the fictional production of African writers irrespective of their location" (5). Cooper's 2008 book, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*, views the new generation of African writers especially those using the English medium as those who have spent time away from their countries of origin; and thus have attracted an international readership, and are devoted to writing about migration or 'multiple worlds and languages' (1). All these opinions of the critics about the features of new African writings and the preoccupation of writers whether home or in the diaspora are quite valid and in order.

The movement from Africa to the new world is one that has rendered both writers and their migrant subjects as transcultural beings who have to navigate international space to redefine self. With relocation to the West comes the reconstruction of postcolonial identity in the Western metropolis negotiated through the dynamic interplay of local and global influences. As Bahmanpour (2010) rightly notes "the notion of identity in general and diasporic identity in particular is not set, fixed and essential whole" (45), but a process which involves such identifications as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, personal traits and even lived experiences. The same view is also expressed by Hall (1993) who suggests in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that identity is a process which is never complete and one that involves transformation and repositioning.

In furtherance of the opinions of Bahmanpour (2010) and Hall (1993) is also that by Fongang (2017) on transcultural subjects who he defines as postcolonial subjects "in a transitional state, not fully belonging in diasporic spaces that constrain their ability for self-definition and identity" (138). While they may struggle to adapt to the new diasporic environment, they eventually settle for in-between spaces or assume hybridity of sort. This reinforces the position expressed by Bhabha (2009) edition of his highly acclaimed and influential book, *The Location of Culture*, where he states that the migrant life is one characterized by movement in-between cultural traditions and revealing hybrid forms of life (xiii). Ultimately, racial realities of postcolonial diasporic subjects especially those from Africa and the Third World eventually create the imperative to occupation of a liminal space or a fringe existence in order to survive in the New World. The liminal or transitional state being one many migrants are consigned to and which they are never able to navigate out of.

As stated earlier, the current wave of migration of Africans to the West is one that has witnessed a significant involvement of African writers both male and female. These writers are joining the migrant narrative and are fictionalizing personal experiences as well as those of their subjects. This is not strange as fiction is constructed out of lived experiences of both writers and their subjects. One can surmise that literary exploration of migration and migratory experiences abound in contemporary African fiction depicting how African migrants live in-between spaces culturally, physically and psychologically. Many of the diasporic writers in their portrayal of experiences of their subjects find themselves infusing some personal ones. Julien Kalenga, a Congolese writer in an interview

affirms this view stating “while writing fiction, you write a part or a whole of your own experience. No novel is denuded of the writer’s own life experience.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a female African writer is one of the new generation writers broadening the African literary canon. She, like many of her contemporaries, has been caught in the current migration flow. Adichie has found herself thrust to the centre to acquire education and from where her writing career has blossomed. She fits squarely into the category branded ‘Afropolitans’ by Selasi even though she denies the label. In her 2005 essay titled “Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)”, Selasi attempts a definition of the contemporary African migrants’ identity and experience in the Western diaspora, an identity construct whose aim is to differentiate the new diaspora from the old that has been pigeonholed into slavery absolutism. The neologism, a coinage from ‘Africa’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ sees the African migrants’ identity formed along ‘natural’, ‘racial’, ‘cultural’ and environmental delineations, and one betraying hybridity of sort. It is noteworthy that the essay ends with the admonition by Selasi for “Afropolitans’ to return ‘Home’ in order to enrich Africa with the knowledge, experiences and acquisitions from the West; but much more to reintegrate themselves to their culture. While the idea enunciated in the said essay is one that has often been received with a flak because of its elitism and identity definition limited by its class characterization, many African migrant literary texts are now surfeit with return home journey of migrants; a preoccupation of Adichie as well in *Americanah*.

Despite Adichie’s denial of Selasi’s ‘Afropolitanism’ as she is quoted by [Tunca and Ledent \(2015\)](#) in their article ‘The Power of a Singular Story: Narrating Africa and Its Diasporas’ to have asserted with force “I’m not an Afropolitan. I’m African, happily so.... I’m comfortable in the world, and it’s not that unusual” (4), but she nonetheless betrays its traits. There abound various instances from her text that prove otherwise. Apart from her novel portraying the return journey of the protagonist, Ifemelu and the deuteragonist, Obinze; the association of returnee emigres in the novel is ‘Nigerpolitan’, an appropriation of Selasi’s own term. Adichie fits squarely into the definition of an Afropolitan and as [Eze \(2013\)](#) observes, Selasi’s neologism is “to reflect the multiple cultural affiliations of today’s diasporic Africans” (3), a coinage that also portrays them as ‘Africans of the world’ to use Selasi’s own expression.

The environment or setting of any work of arts goes a long way in determining its outcome, and as rightly noted by [Owolabi and Omolara \(2013\)](#) “One of the functions of literature is presenting the happenings in the environment” (32). The environment equally plays a motivating factor in the content, character portraiture, language use and the aesthetics of literary productions. The dictum ‘no writer writes in a vacuum’ also points to the influence of the environment/setting in literary works. In this instance, the focus is not on how the characters have interacted with the environment but rather about the interplay of the global and local settings of Adichie’s *Americanah* which has resulted in the negotiation of a new identity for the African migrants.

The global environment is the western diaspora (America and Europe) with limitless economic opportunities and an allure many African migrants and would-be ones find so irresistible. While the local environment is the homeland of ‘Africa’, underdeveloped (few economic prospects), lacking in social amenities, and plagued by wars, poverty and civil unrest. When the two are juxtaposed, the global represents an environment with opportunities, abundance and great prospects while the local with its poor infrastructure and bleak economy signifies a limiting environment. In Adichie’s *Americanah*, the global is represented in such locations as Princeton, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, New Haven, Baltimore, London, Newcastle and Essex to name some. The local is expressed in such places as Lagos and Nsukka.

This article draws mainly on keywords of postcolonial theory such as ‘hybridity’ and ‘liminality’ in portraying how the global and the local environments may have greatly influenced the identity change of many African migrants in the Western diaspora. The phenomenon of globalization holds sway in the context of the novel as it explores the theme of migration hence the notions of hybridity and liminality. Selasi’s ‘Afropolitanism’ also comes in handy as it is an attempt at defining the contemporary black migrant whose identity cannot be hinged on the old

African diaspora whose major distinguishing paradigm is slavery. What needs to be taken into account here is the understanding that in the postcolonial era, migration of the people of the erstwhile colonies to the old metropolis is now rife.

2. THE NOVEL *AMERICANAH*

Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* is one that captures the love story of the protagonist, Ifemelu and Obinze through different stages – finding love, separation and reunification. It is a novel that narrates not only the love story of the two protagonists, but one that focuses on contemporary issues such as migration, dislocation, race, alterity and identity as they affect African migrants in Western diaspora. It has often been described as a novel about love, race and the metaphor of hair, but beyond that, it is one that narrates the predicament of African migrants in the West. It is a bildungsroman of the protagonist that brings to the fore the realities and postcolonial identity of the black race in the West. Not only are readers presented with the self-realization of Ifemelu, Obinze and so many other African migrants in the West, there is also the devotion to issues of otherness, displacement, transculturation and the fringe status of the African migrants.

The novel set over three continents is in a sense defining the 'New Transatlantic Writing' (Murphy, 2017) and one influenced by the novelist's personal migration experiences. The return migration of some of the characters eventually reinforces the call by Selasi for all 'Afropolitans' to return home and help salvage the battered image and economy of their home countries. Obinze though forcefully removed from United Kingdom for overstaying his visa, returns home and finds success in his real estate business. Ifemelu in spite of her success as a blogger in the United States returns to Nigeria and reintegrates herself to her society. Much more than a reconciliation of two love-birds – Ifemelu and Obinze, there is the extended reintegration of some Africans far removed to their homeland by the return migration. It is instructive that the association of returnees that Ifemelu joins on her return to Nigeria is named 'Nigerpolitans', which in a sense is Adichie's appropriation of Selasi's 'Afropolitans'.

3. THE DYNAMIC INTERPLAY OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS IN *AMERICANAH*

The environment, which is the setting or the natural world that we inhabit does play a great role in how we conceive our world; our identity; our physical, sociological and psychological well-being. As mentioned earlier, the environment of African literature may not necessarily be only Africa anymore. It may be any of these scenarios: Africa, the new world or any location outside of Africa where the people of African descent have migrated or it could be a synthesis of the two. There may be the need to now redefine the setting/environment of African literature to reflect the scenarios earlier described. However, any text that must fit into African literary canon must pivot around Africans and issues and challenges that they engage with on daily basis in whatever environment they find themselves.

What is responsible for the multilocality of the environment of African literature can be pinned on the phenomenon of globalization which has morphed the whole world into one. The phenomenon has far reaching implications on culture and cultural productions because of mobility of people, capital, information and knowledge. This is probably why contemporary African prose according to Adesanmi and Dunton (2005) may be seen as betraying national allegiance and may now very much express a more global outlook. This assertion is also attested to by a review of Akhtiorskaya's *Panic in a Suitcase*, a novel that uses the metaphor of a suitcase to portray global mobility of writers like Adichie. These writers just like their fictional subjects are always on the move and are always "packing, unpacking, and repacking" (Jay, 2015) their suitcases (experiences and anxieties) as a traveler packs clothes and other belongings in a suitcase and takes them wherever he/she goes. The following quoted lines from Jay (2015) give more insight into his view on contemporary migrant fiction:

... literature born of mobility and displacement has proliferated at a remarkable rate

during the last three decades, moving from the margins to very near the center of literary production, especially in the United States. In this work, the nation takes a back seat to the border, and the solidarity of national identity gives way to the fracturing and reimagining of individual and cultural subjectivities (9).

More often than not, writing about the displacement, dislocation, alienation, otherness and the realities of migrants in fiction necessitates the need to revisit the conditions that propel the relocation in the first place. The writer is then found writing about the local and thereby placing it at the global sphere. The global environment is also part of the narrative in order for the realities of the migrants to be known by those in the local environment or homeland. Apart from this, there may be the need to reterritorialize in order to construct new postcolonial/postnational identities for migrants. It is not uncommon for writers to juxtapose the global and local so as to bring out the differences between the two locations.

There is a constant interplay of global and local concerns in migrant literature through a plethora of means some of which are: character and identity portraiture, language use, lived experiences, aesthetics of the work, and cultural practices to focus on only a few. Adichie's *Americanah* as mentioned earlier is a novel set in three continents – Africa, America and Europe; a novel about migration and migratory experiences and return migration of some of the subjects. A return migration that Okome (2014) observes could be 'temporal or permanent', and could be 'volitional or compelled' (1).

Nigeria which is the local environment of the novel exemplifies a place of limited opportunities, a bleak economy and a nation characterized by chaos, confusion and bad governance. In actual fact, the novelist in *Americanah* avails the readers the privilege of seeing what the local setting, that is Nigeria, is like before and even after migration of many of the subjects. Unlike many immigrant tales that portray migrants fleeing wars or poverty, Adichie's is about those of the middle-class who are leaving for better opportunities following incessant strikes by university lecturers/workers and with fewer economic opportunities at home. To a great extent, Adichie leaving a Nigerian University for another in the United States and the protagonist of *Americanah*, Ifemelu towing the same line attests to self-inscription by the novelist with both the novelist and her protagonist conforming to Afropolitan identity. There is thus the tendency to presuppose Ifemelu's experiences profile that of Adichie herself in America.

If the local environment with a favourable weather is characterized by communal living and guided by customs and tradition, the global is where the African migrants are confronted with new culture and are able to live out of the confines of tradition. Adichie and others of her ilk have capitalized on their presence in the metropole to write about topics such as sex, gay relationship and others generally considered as taboos in works of older generation of African writers. Ifemelu becoming a live-in lover to Curt and Blaine is an act that will be totally frowned upon in the local environment. The protagonist's readiness to reignite her love life with Obinze even with the latter being married with a child is not an act that the culture equally encourages. In actuality, exposure of African migrants to Western culture can be said to have led to total erosion of African culture if not its total abnegation.

A look at the characters of the novel *Americanah* presents a mix of representatives of both the global and local, characters who are interacting at visceral, superficial and deep levels in the metropole. The novel is replete with representatives of the local such as Ifemelu, Obinze, Aunty Uju, Emenike, Dike, Bartholomew, Nicholas, Ojiugo, Kayode, Ginika, Vincent and other African diaspora representatives like Wambui, Kweku, Cleotilde, Aisha and Mariama of the braiding shop. The global has such characters like Kimberly, Laura, Curt, Blaine, Shan, Georgina and Nigel; characters who fall within the white and black spectrum of American race configuration. The interactions among the characters are pointers to the postcolonial reality of the African migrants, a reality that places black people at the lowest rung of the race ladder in the West.

Following the realization of the African migrants' 'blackness' is the effort at constructing new postnational identities. The title of the novel itself is an attestation to the hybrid outcome of the identities of the migrants exemplified in the protagonist of the novel, Ifemelu. 'Americanah' is a slang given America returnees who are seen to be clearly manifesting a distinct identity markedly different from the one before diaspora experience and one not totally in sync with that of hostland. It is this observed distinctness in identity of African migrants that reinforces the notions of hybridity and liminality; with both pointing to the outcome of mixed cultures and experiences leading to their becoming completely different and new. The question then is whether African migrants are negotiating new identities through adaptation, acculturation or assimilation? While the representatives of the global treat the local characters in a condescending manner and see them as the inferior 'other', the local strive to be like the global in every sense, a tendency responsible for their ambivalence.

The local environment is one with a friendly and familiar weather; it is one guarded by customs and tradition, where there is communality among kith and kin, and where certain topics such as premarital sex and having children outside of wedlock are considered reprehensible. Ifemelu's home in Lagos as far as she can remember is home to relatives and kinsmen arriving the city to learn a trade, go to school or seek for jobs. Because of the negativity attached to a woman being a mistress in many African cultures, Ifemelu's mum cannot come out openly to tell neighbours that Auntie Uju is one. Obinze's mum on realizing that her son and Ifemelu are engaged in premarital sex expresses her displeasure and counsels against it.

America and Europe represent the global environment, the centre or the metropole, which for a lot of African migrants is not only hostile in terms of its frigidity, but equally alienates them. But unfortunately, the reality only dawns upon arrival. Despite their otherness, many of the migrants are able to negotiate their new reality even if that will involve assuming a false identity in order to secure employment and earn a living. Ifemelu is encouraged to assume the identity of Ngozi Okonkwo so she can secure employment as she is not eligible to work with her student visa. Obinze's situation in the United Kingdom is even more precarious as he assumes the identity of a fellow Nigerian named Vincent who takes thirty-five percent of his pay. Vincent's bid to increase his cut of Obinze's pay to forty-five percent, an attempt he rebuffs leads to his being exposed as an illegal immigrant, and his eventual deportation. Their's is an existence that exemplifies modern day slavery in the metropole.

But the global environment is one where against all odds the migrants are able to navigate through stifling racism. Ifemelu apart from achieving her objective of travelling to the United States to earn a degree is able to acquire the citizenship of the country due to her relationship with Curt, her white American boyfriend; she is equally able to start a highly successful blog through which she interrogates the issues of race in America. By the time Ifemelu returns home either as an 'Afropolitan' or 'Nigeropolitan', she is well armed with an American passport and money. Just as there could be "secondary and repeat migration" (Okome, 2014) Ifemelu finds comfort in the fact that "she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay" (*Americanah*, 443).

The interplay of the global and local environment is very glaring in Adichie's language use in *Americanah*. The eclectic nature of Adichie's language attests to her novel being intercultural and one characterized by a global and borderless topography (Berning, 2015). In the novel is a medley of Standard English, Nigerian English, American usage/slangs, Nigerian Pidgin and the use of Igbo sentences, phrases and words, some explained and some not. The Igbo phrases and words have been foregrounded through italicization. The interplay of all the mixes reinforces the hybrid nature of the novel; hybridity that manifests at different levels (characterization, identity portraiture and language). The tendency to mix or switch codes is seen by Berning (2015) as a metaphor for handling more than one identity by the narrator and protagonist of the novel, Ifemelu. It is also a reflection of the various experiences and outlooks represented in the novel.

Examples abound in the novel about deliberate eclectic language display by the novelist; a stylistic choice that incorporates the following: interlanguage, glossing, code-switching, vernacular translation, syntactic fusion,

translated and untranslated Igbo words (Anyokwu, 2011). Most of the novel, *Americanah* exists in Standard English; however, examples of the exclusive usage of other language types are given below.

Nigerian English is gleaned from this exchange between Ginika and Ifemelu:

“If you see how they laughed at me in high school when I said that somebody was boning for me. Because boning here means to have sex. So I had to keep explaining that in Nigeria it means carrying face. And can you imagine ‘half-caste’ is a bad word here?” (145)

And the use of Nigerian Pidgin among prisoners who are quarantined before deportation:

“Ah this na my second time. The first time I came with different passport,” one of them said.

“Na for work wey they get me o.”

“E get one guy wey they deport, him don come back get him paper. Na him wey go help me,” (323)

Use of American variety can be seen in the following instances:

“Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh.” And what this means is “I’m like, Oh God, I was so mad.”(20)

“Pooh-reet-back” for ‘put it back’ (130)

“Ahn-ahn” (143)

Use of Igbo proverbs in a contest of mastery of the language between Ifemelu and Obinze:

“*Ama m atu inu.*” and the translation ‘A frog does not run in the afternoon for nothing’.

“*Akota ife ka ubi, e lee oba.*” translated as ‘If something bigger than the farm is dug up, the barn is sold.’

“*Acho afu adi ako n’akpa dibia.*” The English translation being ‘The medicine man’s bag has all kinds of things.’ (78)

And there are the untranslated ones like:

“Dike, *I mechago?*” (131)

“I ga-asikwa.” (514)

“Obinze ma ife” (514)

“Obi ocha” (515)

“Aru adikwa?” (531)

The strategy of fusing Standard English with the Nigerian variety, American variety and use of Igbo in some instances has resulted in a hybrid text. While the focus of this work is not necessarily on stylistic devices deployed by Adichie, it has generally been observed that she follows the example of Achebe in adapting the language of the imperialist, English, to reflect indigenous speech patterns and thought process. Anyokwu (2011) avers that the deployment of Igbo language, some translated and some untranslated, amount to ‘Igboization’ of English language by Adichie. However, a fact that no critic will be able to discountenance is that cross-cultural texts such as Adichie’s will always betray several allegiances in the use of language and aesthetics. Unlike Anyokwu’s overgeneralized conclusion that “Adichian aesthetics points the way to the future of literature in Africa” (2011, 80), this may not be true of writers of African descent in the diaspora who may never have experienced the continent culturally. The recourse to use of the specific variety of American English associated with urban culture is an effort not only aimed at appropriation by African migrants but one that points at assimilation.

It is also instructive to state that the dynamic mix of the local and global environments is one that has a great impact on the psychological state of many of the migrants. They are the subalterns who are in the shadow, marginalized culturally and socially and who are made to feel inferior and unwelcome in the New World. Ifemelu finds herself sleeping with a white tennis coach in exchange for money triggering depression, self-loathing and near mental breakdown. Dike’s suicide attempt as a result of unsavoury racist experiences is inconceivable by a child in African cultural milieu but points to the psychological effect of the American environment. Many of the African migrants on being subjected to various forms of discrimination and racism are more or less made to feel less human; and left with a low self-esteem and damaged psyche.

4. CONCLUSIONS

That the multilocality of the environment in contemporary African literature is creating a distinct identity for writers and their literary subjects of the same ancestry in the diaspora or those who have had migrant experience is not in doubt. With globalization is a cultural reality that may present any of these three scenarios: homogenization, heterogeneity and hybridization. In the case of African writers and their subjects who are in the diaspora or are writing about migrant experience, there is the leaning towards hybridization of culture, identity and literature itself.

The multilocality or multi-setting of the novel *Americanah* points to the reality that the setting of contemporary African novel is not necessarily Africa again. Many African writers especially those of the novel genre have joined the migration train to the West from where they are churning out what Walkowitz (2006) refers to as 'transnational books', which according to her comport to more than one literary tradition. Books by émigré writers or those based on migrant experience always present several settings – the homeland and the hostland. *Americanah* may have been set over three continents – Africa, America and Europe, however, the subjects of the work remain largely Africans.

The questions that plague the mind are whether we can begin to view literary works of migrant writers as being set between cultures or if it is right to conclude that literary works by writers like Adichie can be adjudged literature of environmental synthesis? The obvious answer to the two questions is in the affirmative. Even though there has been interplay of the local and global environments in *Americanah*, the work has not deviated from the norm of African literary canon which according to Okuyade (2014) is of "a dual utilitarian dialectic whereby the writer both entertains and teaches" (xvii). In this instance, the novelist has gone a step further by informing and interrogating the complexities involved in migration and its varying experiences. But despite the multiple environments or settings of Adichie's *Americanah*, the focus of the work still remains Africans and issues pertaining to their existence in the Western diaspora.

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