

Globalisation in Literature: A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's Short Stories

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's literary presence in the international literary landscape contributes to the expanding fields of diasporic studies, ongoing postcolonial studies and very importantly to unmasking the profound paradox of globalisation in contemporary times. Adichie has cultivated a narrative style that attests to her understanding of the human condition. These humans are African migrants at the fringes of their homeland and the international community. This essay examines Adichie's short stories: "The Arrangers of Marriage" "The Thing around Your Neck" and "The Shivering", and proposes that Adichie's short stories unearth the realities of globalisation for African migrants on the margins of the international community and the significance of the politics of dislocation.

Keywords: Margin, migrants, dislocation, globalisation, homeland

Introduction

The emergence of the world as a global village has been an interesting process: more significant have been the impact of globalization and the perception of this by many citizens of the world who grapple with the profound paradox of living in a 'global village'. Globalisation is not a new concept. However, with interaction across national boundaries, the assumptions that follow and the impact on globalising people; the concept remains a complex process in modern times for migrants and their dependants who assume that globalisation portends a means of advancement.

It is against this backdrop that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes. Adichie was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1977 when Nigeria was grappling with military rule and maladministration. Raised in Enugu, Adichie's childhood and adolescence were spent in the university town of Nsukka. After completing her secondary education, she left Nigeria for the United States for studies. Adichie lives in the United States and visits Nigeria occasionally. We are familiar with her emerging consciousness and literary perspective; one informed by her exposure to the politics of globalisation. Adichie has written on a wide range of subjects; however, her novel *Americanah* and many of her short stories attest to her preoccupation with complexities of globalisation, the question of identity and belonging in modern times. Daria Tunca states that Adichie's preoccupation with a three-fold concern: ethnicity, colonisation and migration is palpable in her works. She however insists that these preoccupations are not so new considering the Nigerian writer's grapple with colonialism and its corollaries. Tunca states that the realities of a multi-cultural society and the culture clash of Nigeria's British

colonial era remain quite similar to the realities migrants grapple with in contemporary times. National spaces (293).

Drawn along the realities of transnational existence, Adichie's short stories reflect the African migrants' engagement with globalization at the fringes of their homeland and the international community. This paper critically examines the reoccurrence of globalization in Adichie's short stories; also, it examines how Adichie unearths the realities of globalisation for African migrants and the significance of the politics of globalisation and belonging.

Politics of Globalization

While the concept of globalisation means different things to different people, the concept has also retained its controversial position in academic studies and discourses that have consistently limited it to the political and economic interaction of countries across transnational borders. Frederick Cooper buttresses this when he states that:

Globalization is itself a term whose meaning is not clear and over which substantial disagreements exist among those who use it. It can be used so broadly that it embraces everything and therefore means nothing, but for most writers, it carries a powerful set of images, if not a precise definition (96). The concept therefore seems to derive its significance from the diverse factors, images, representations and implications of transnational interaction. Post-1945 it is trade, politics, the seemingly innocent activities of migrants in search of greener pastures and influence from social media.

M. Habib opines that the perception of globalisation prevalent across the globe differs. In Western Europe and North America, globalisation is the availability of numerous opportunities for economic development of the world and with significant contributions made toward improving the human condition. The perception is different in Third World nations since globalisation is viewed as a harmful hegemonic process and neocolonial strategy to maximize inequality within nation states while the 'Center and First World nations feign to enforce universalism (14).

In Anthony Giddens' view quoted in Susan C. Ziehl, we find that globalisation is not limited to the widening of economic and political windows and trade implications. Giddens' insists that globalisation is a force that changes our everyday experiences. He also states that the influence of globalisation on the integral aspects of the human life such as: the family, gender roles, sexuality and identity is usually significant; thus, individuals are not only pressured into reassessing themselves but redefining who they are as perceptions, conventions and traditional values retreat, giving way to new identities and ways of perceiving and living (5).

The forces of globalisation and process of globalising do not leave an individual, identity or nation-state the same considering the push, pull and intense pressure towards universalism and integration in the 'global village'. It is unfortunate that maintaining "cultural autonomy and identity in the face of globalization" (M. Habib 20) remains a complex process for so-called Third World countries where already suppressed, retreating and damaged cultural identities exist. Thus, Habib argues that "globalization represents the end of the nation-states and the proliferation of cultural relationships characterized by difference and hybridity" (20). While these possibilities exist imperatively with the margins and peripheries largely occupied by postcolonies, interrogating the politics of globalisation and belonging in the process of

globalisation is imperative since nations with dominant cultures at the centre of globalisation seem to be gleaning significantly the dividends of globalisation at the detriment of some Members of this global village,

Mohsen Masoomi in a review of the concept of globalisation and its impact on culture asserts that the process has been significantly associated with the obliteration of cultural identities especially by dominant Western cultures. Masoomi states that while the process could occur via numerous means such as, the media, transnational trade, relocation and mobility of people; globalisation exposes cultures to other cultures and therefore fosters the modification and hybridisation of cultures from their original forms. It is unfortunate that while the process is perfected, cultural integrity is tampered with as dominant cultures overwhelm marginal cultures (42). This accounts for the cynicism with which the concept of globalisation is often viewed.

While global economy is at the fore of discourses in globalisation, the social impact of this process remains rather significant. Masoomi asserts that while globalisation and literary studies may be located in different fields of study, they are connected since literature and literary studies evoke globalisation in diverse ways. He asserts that the integral role of the English language in globalisation, in translation and the dissemination of literature via the (new) media and the preoccupation of literature with globalisation and global themes cannot be overlooked (56-57).

Analysis of Selected Short Stories by Chimamanda Adichie

This essay examines the representations of globalisation in three of Chimamanda Adichie's narratives which are analysed to project Adichie's preoccupation with unearthing the realities of globalisation and belonging in the global village. Adichie focuses on her protagonists' experiences in America and the innumerable disappointments that trail their expectations as migrants in America. Significantly, these predominantly Igbo characters engage "abundance of unreasonable hope" (Adichie, 26) since their survival in hostlands is integral and their geographical dislocation from home is regarded as great fortune. For instance, in "The Arrangers of Marriage", the issues of acculturation and assimilation are highlighted. Chinaza, a young Nigerian lady, is married off to a Nigerian medical doctor in America. The newly married couple arrive New York together. This seeming privilege turns sour as Chinaza, the wife and protagonist of the story, arrives America for the first time and struggles to reconcile her Igboness and identity with her husband's attitude that attests to his acclimatising Americanising as imperative in securing him a place in the mainstream of American life.

The story is the protagonist's personal encounter with her Americanising husband in the United States. These processes, as Chinaza observes and is told, are her husband's unrelenting attempt at diffusing cultural and racial boundaries, and fostering integration at even the oddest expense. Emeka Ofodile therefore becomes a complex epitome of migrant's recognition of boundaries in transnational existence, the straddling state and the desire to belong successfully. These events culminate in the personal development and re-shaping of the protagonist's perception of America, her relationship with her Americanising Nigerian husband, her marriage and her emotional struggle to reconcile these differences. Firstly, her new home does not look like "those of the white newly-weds in the American films the NTA (Nigerian Television Authority) shows on Saturday nights" (Adichie, 167). At this point the story implicates the media as giving impetus to migrant's expectations and confidence in the

"pull" from homeland. This initial observation is inconsequential compared to the other discoveries she makes during her stay in America.

Also, Ofole is desperate to integrate into the mainstream of American life and culture and he adopts drastic measures targeted at eroding his Igbo/Nigerian identity. He changes his name from "Odile Emeka Udenwa" to "Dave Bell" since Americans have hard times pronouncing this; he puts a restriction on the use of the Igbo language in their home and outside and insists on his wife familiarising with America and having an American attitude. Dave accords the Americans culture a superior status and refuses to acknowledge that with his efforts at belonging in America, his Igbo/Nigerian identity is eroded by the American culture. Dave's attitude however shows his seriousness in belonging in America as an American and not a Nigerian. He passionately describes his choices and strategies to his wife this way:

You don't understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the road side. You have to use your English name here (Adichie 172).

Dave assumes a central position in his marginality as he describes new ways of seeing, being and even speaking, if belonging in America is to be attained. He seems to suggest that belonging is a key aspect of surviving this global village; and surviving is more important for immigrant than a national/cultural identity and loyalties that usually do not guarantee his stake in the stream of things. Thus, he becomes active as in "American" while his Igbo/Nigerian identity is made invisible and insignificant. Having attained a certain transnational status, he tries to "reform" Chinaza as a matter of duty and thus bridges the gap between her Igbo/Nigerian identity and the new identity he thinks she must acquire to belong. "Dave" warns her with the example of a Spanish family, who speak Spanish as they shop in the cheap neighbourhood store:

Look at the people who shop here; they are the people who immigrated and continue to act as if they are back in their countries...they will never move forward unless they adapt to America. They will always be doomed to supermarkets like this (Adichie 175).

Chinaza's husband dismisses these Spanish migrants and many others who retain their cultural and national affinities as unwise. On the contrary, it is significant that while Chinaza's husband works hard at adapting to America and changing his social status as a global citizen, Shirley, his neighbour is sorry that Americans have no culture. Shirley changes her name to Nia (a Swahili name), likes Chinaza's Nigerian recipes and learns to speak Igbo.

Chinaza discovers that her new husband is involved in a sham marriage with a woman who threatens to report him to immigration. She also discovers that "Dave" and Shirley were once sexually as her new friend opens up unashamedly: "I fucked him, almost two years ago, when he first moved in. I fucked him and after a week it was over. We never dated" (Adichie 185). These discoveries make the protagonist miserable as she weighs the options available to her in America. Chinaza's marital journey metaphorically and graphically depicts the tensions engendered by globalization and the complexity of migrants exposure to other cultures.

“The Thing around Your Neck” by Adichie also examines the reality associated with living in America as an immigrant against the backdrop of the expectation of family members, friends and dependants. Twenty-two years old Akunna wins an American visa and goes to live with her "uncle" who is already resident in the United States. The few days she spends in the United States introduces her to the migrant's ordeal. She becomes spatially homeless and emotionally distraught when her "uncle" tries to molest her sexually. She discovers that America has its unpleasant sides and realises like her "uncle" tells her that: "America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too" (Adichie 116).

When Akunna loses the shelter and the comfort of the only relatives she knows in America, she remains brave. She ends up working as a waitress in Connecticut. The salary can only pay for her rent and not cover college fees or buy the handbags, shoes, perfumes and clothes she had once agreed to buy for her friends and family when she got to America. She however works hard to send money home to her mother in Nigeria. Although she does not show any disaffection for being in America, Akunna remains sensitive to condescending racial reactions.

When Akunna meets and dates Juan, a young white American she meets at the restaurant, she is not so lonely any longer. Their intimacy activates her sensuality and diverts her attention from the harsh realities she tries to negotiate daily in America. However, their relationship does not escape the bias and reaction of both whites and blacks who think they are abnormal and thus, unequally yoked. Akunna remains the most sensitive of the partners to these reactions:

You knew by people's reactions that you two were abnormal—the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones were too nice. The old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem, your self-loathing. Or the black women who smile swift solidarity smiles; the black men who tried so hard to forgive you, saying a too-obvious hi to him; the white men and women who said "what a good-looking pair" too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open-mindedness to themselves (Adichie 125).

Although she experiences relief from the anxiety and tightening around her neck that comes with being a lonely stranger in America, Akunna lives in the reality of these reactions as they remind her of her foreignness. This relationship seems to relieve Akunna of the difficulties her identity exposes her to in America. This notwithstanding, the complex power play between existing racial dichotomies of "Self" and "Other" is expressed and acknowledged by both whites and blacks in this story. Akunna finds that explaining any racist's encounter to Juan, her American boyfriend is futile, "he did not understand" (Adichie 124).

When Akunna eventually decides to write a letter home, her is dead. Her mother replies to say that her father died five months back. With her regular monetary gift, her family affords a good burial for her father. Akunna decides to visit home and cannot say if she'll return and if she does, if she'll return to her white lover. The story ends on a rather inconclusive note pointing to the vacillation that most times characterises transnational interactions.

The Shivering", is set on the campus of Princeton University. This story explores the complexities of migration. The narrative opens by providing useful information, revealing the basic relationship of the two major characters in the story. Opening with the tragic information from home on the day a plane crashed in Nigeria, the same day the Nigerian first tady died, someone knocked imidly on Ukamaka's door" (Adichie 142); this narrative keeps the reader anticipating events which are linked to Nigeria. On the contrary, the narrative events which follow focus on situating these two individuals who connect as acquaintances because of the things they share in common their Nigerian nationality, loneliness and personal crises

The knock on Ukamaka's door is from a man who promptly introduces himself. "I am a Nigerian. I live on the third floor. I came so that we can pray about what is happening in our country (Adichie 143). Ukamaka is surprised that she is easily identified by another Nigerian as a Nigerian. She joins the stranger in a session of Pentecostal-styled prayer for her country which makes her shiver. After the prayers, Chinedu the Nigerian man still stands in her flat, while Ukamaka is also reluctant to ask him to leave. They both realise their need for each other's company. Chinedu is a standby for Ukamaka who still nurses the breakup with her ex-boyfriend. Udenna. She shares the realities of her failed relationship with Chinedu whose taste and class sentiments seems very different from hers and her ex-boyfriend's. She is grateful that he fills Udenna's gap in some strange way and helps her in the recovery process even though he appears to be asexual. Chinedu on the other hand appears leaden despite his growing acquaintance with Ukamaka. He becomes inextricably overwhelmed by the realities he grupples with and decides to open up:

Look, Ukamaka, I have to tell you what's happening. Sit down...
I am out of status. My visa expired three years ago...
You're not in Princeton?
I never said I was.

I'm going to get a deportation notice from immigration anytime soon.
Nobody at home knows my real situation. I haven't been able to send them much since I lost my construction job. My boss was a good man and was paying me under the table but he said he did not want trouble now that they are talking about raiding workplaces.
Have you tried finding a lawyer? She asked.
A lawyer for what? I don't have a case (Adichie 163).

Chinedu depicts significantly the migrant's tendency to conceal the dark secrets and difficulties that trail emigration and stay in the foreign metropolis. As the story progresses, he succeeds in attracting Ukamaka's sympathy. She however refuses to ask more questions since perceives Chinedu has more information about his status than he is willing to disclose. Adichie however suggests through these two characters and their relationship that no matter the deficiencies, the vital place of acquaintance for immigrants in handling the difficulties that characterise their daily existence and the need to belong despite the varied reflections of dislocation is imperative. At the end of the story, Chinedu concedes to following Ukamaka to her church-the Catholic which he does not hide his displeasure about. While at the Gray Stone Church, Father Patrick blesses the people with holy water as Ukamaka observes keenly:

How much more subdued catholic masses were in American how in Nigeria it would have been a vibrant green branch from a mango tree that the priest would dip in a bucket of holy water held by a hurrying, sweating, Mass-server. how people would have been drenched; and how smiling and making the sign of the cross, they would have felt blessed (Adichie 166).

Chinoda's religion preference notwithstanding, the Gray Stone Church becomes significant in establishing his growing acquaintance with Ukamaka. Perceptibly, it also becomes a stiff reminder to Ukamaka that she is Nigerian and at home, things are done differently. The narrative presents the interplay of differences through Ukamaka who observes and "voices" them. The authorial comment facilitated by Adichie's crisscrossed memories and news from home is subsumed within Ukamaka's "voicing" of these observed differences.

Conclusion

Chimamanda Adichie's narratives draw from her significant sensibility that comes with having once lived in Nigeria and experiencing the realities of living in America. In the narratives studied in this essay, Adichie inevitably authenticates the complexity of globalization and the process of getting globalised for African migrants. Adichie's stories express her preoccupation with exploring migrant issues from marital and relational perspectives. These representations convey metaphorically the significance of global interaction and existence especially for individuals who journey from the world's margins in modern times. These narratives attest to the convergence of the assumptions and reality embodied in globalisation.

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