

Diasporic Experience, Gender Dialogue and the Dynamics of Cultural Encounter in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the works of two contemporary Nigerian writers, namely: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie's and *A Bit of Difference* by Sefi Atta. The two writers are women of Nigerian descent, who have lived in Nigeria at some point in their lives as well as the West. Their works of fiction cover a range of diverse themes and genres from historical fiction and politics to sexuality, gender and mapping of women's agency in urban spaces. This study is situated within the growing scholarship in new African and Nigerian Diaspora through the prism of cultural and literary diaspora. African Diaspora theorists such as Kim Butler and Isidore Okpewho, and gender theorists such as Chandra Mohanty (1984) and Caroline Henderson (2010), are used as aids to analysing this paper. The two novels are of critical interest because of the problematic representation of women in first generation writing in terms of agency, voice and gender. The modern voices as seen in the two women are premised on revolutionary aesthetics, aimed at changing the status quo. The thus paper examines how the two writers contribute to the global discourse of gender, intercultural politics, and the dynamics of diasporic cultural identities. The paper concludes that the works of the two diasporic West African women writers use the mutating position and identity of the diasporic African woman to explore gender imbalances and dynamics in both Western and African spaces.

Key Words: Nigerian Diaspora, Diasporic Literature, Gender Imbalance, cultural encounters.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the concept of diaspora has served as prominent research site through which the dynamics of international migration and the shifting state borders across populations. Quite strikingly, over the last decade, the term 'diaspora' has become popular in both academic literature and public discourses (Mevi Hova 5). Nationalist groups or governments often use the concept of diaspora to pursue agendas of nation-state-building or controlling populations abroad. The concept is invoked to mobilise support for group identity or some political project, sometimes in the service of an external homeland, such as the protection of ethnic minorities living in another state (i.e. kinstate protection). In fact, this diasporic ideology is made manifest in literary creativity, especially by Nigerian diaspora writers. The diasporic characters in these literary works often re-name themselves or shorten their names as strategy to assimilate into the western and host culture.

The debate around gender issues has today assumed a central relevance not just in the academic field but also in popular culture and has become a dominant aspect of diaspora discourses. It can be said, therefore, that the academic research offers today a complete overview of all the issues related to gender and sexualities; moreover, through their peculiar multidisciplinary approach, gender studies have both significantly contributed to the development of pre-existing disciplines and laid the groundwork for the creation of new subfields of enquiry, such as Queer Studies and 'Feminist Critical Race Studies' (Varma 2006).

This paper examines the way in which selected contemporary works by diasporic West African women writers, particularly Adichie and Atta use the mutating position and identity of the diasporic African women to explore gender imbalance and dynamics in both Western and African spaces. The novels considered are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2013). The paper argues that in the two works, underscore an expansion of the dismantling of patriarchal dominance in traditional African societies through the empowerment of these women experience as a result of their migration. The analysis in this paper examines the ways the novels' protagonists must learn to navigate both Western and African gender norms through their relationships with men and within their families. While they do not choose to stay in the West, their ability to question the patriarchal dictates implicit in the cultures of both the West and their

homelands, and their subsequent rejection of these dictates, position them as new kind of global figures who are willing to exploit the resources of the West to strengthen their own nationalistic agenda, their national pride and their national identity. This is a clear reference to Okpewho's (2001), argument on 'positionality and identity'.

Adichie's novel *Americanah* to consider how class and economic wealth dictate diaspora African women's choices and capacity to negotiate the challenges of migration as well as their return to their homelands. Next, is the discussion on Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* and a consideration of how the global and nationalistic demands of migration affect the diasporic African woman in her quest to achieve self-affirmation, gender balance and the ways in which she explores new avenues of articulating self-worth, marriage bargain and independence for herself through gender identity. Lastly, the paper focuses on the gender imbalance and dynamics embedded in the texts. The choice of the authors is motivated by the fact that their fictions focus on the young educated African women, who emigrate voluntarily to the West, but with conscious mindset into the phenomenon of 'return migration' that acts as a possibility for these women, in their 'homeland plus diasporia' status. In this particular context, "voluntary immigration and immigrant status play pivotal role in diasporic experience because they enable a more expansive migratory experience which contributes to the multicultural experiences that shape the protagonists' identity" (Hova 5). In the two settings, the protagonists of the novels under consideration have the flexibility of moving from one place to the other and are not necessarily bound to one specific place. Gender dynamics in these settings, then, is also explored through the phenomenon of homecoming. In fact, the protagonists' expansive and flexible migratory experience does not spare them the identity crisis experienced by many displaced people. Despite their achievements in their host country, and their abilities to travel easily back and forth to different places or to return to their home country, they are still caught in a third space of both comfort and conflict where they enjoy their status while nonetheless struggling with feeling and being seen as out of place, unable to fully embrace Western identity while being torn between African traditional values and Western ones.

The different topics explored in contemporary Nigerian writing astonish the reader with their urgent authenticity. Many Nigerian writers concentrate on

the experience of people who live in the country, which is very culturally complex and abounds in difficulties such as corruption, economic problems, or religious diversity. The Third Generation Nigerian Literature focuses not only on the inner issues of the state but, given the current state of affairs, the characters are often migrants, placed in situations where they search for their identity in a foreign country, which may lead to a decision of the protagonists to alter their nationality and become as British or as American as possible. Nigerian postcolonial writing focuses on what it means to be Nigerian, whether it is only possible to be Nigerian when one lives in their homeland or this is not connected with where one lives but with their way of living. It is on the basis of this that this paper applies the theoretical framework of African diasporic theory espoused by Isidore Okpewho et al and Kim Butler, and the gender theory postulated by Mohanty and Henderson.

Theoretical Framework: The African Diaspora Theory

This paper is based on the diaspora theory enunciated by Isidore Okpewho et al and Kim Butler, two essentialists and the gender theory espoused by Mohanty and Henderson. The idea of choosing this theoretical framework is on the premise of Isidore Okpewho and Kim Butler's positions on essentialism and intersectionality, and Mohanty and Henderson's new gender feminist belief. Okpewho introduces the African diaspora theory with a brief and somewhat turgid statement on the scope of Africa-diaspora studies. In it, he at once claims the maximal terrain for diaspora studies. He argues that the work chooses:

'to examine the ways in which the transplanted Africans and their progeny confronted the host environment and built a life for themselves, and especially the ideologies of selfhood that have guided the efforts of adjustment to the world in which they find themselves' (Okpewho et al 124).

In so doing, he emphasizes the '*diaspora apart*' model. Okpewho locates most of the studies in the book according to their placement along the interpretive continuum separating 'essentialism' and 'anti-essentialism' – that is, assumptions that cultural practices in the African diaspora drew substantially on surviving African practices, as opposed to the assumption that diaspora cultural practices grew overwhelmingly out of life experience far from the homeland. While this distinction evokes the differences between Herskovits and Frazier, it refers all the more to Paul Gilroy in *The Black*

Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, because Gilroy follows the 'diaspora apart' model, except that he also treats the Caribbean as a secondary homeland for settlers in Britain.

As Okpewho puts it, "Essentialism" has emerged in recent diaspora discourse as an ugly label for any tendency to see the imprint of the homeland or ancestral culture— in this case, Africa – in any aspect of the lifestyles or outlook of African descended peoples in the western Atlantic world. Further on, Okpewho argues against Gilroy's 'postmodernist disdain for the idea of "nation"'. Gilroy was controversial in criticizing US-based scholars for 'essentialism', by which he meant that they preferred connection with an unchanging African past to involvement in the complexity of modernity. Gilroy's desire to break free from the shackles of African 'tradition' made it difficult for him to connect to modern Africa. Okpewho labels this flight from the idea of "home" as 'an obsessive phobia against all forms of essentialism', and makes reference to the concepts of 'positionality' and 'identity', which deal with the '*homeland plus diaspora*'. Kim Butler, on the other hand, emphasizes selectiveness more than eclecticism. She makes substantial progress toward applying a '*homeland plus diaspora*' model to the study of the African diaspora. Butler addresses connections within communities of the diaspora. Her assumptions are that most Africans in diaspora are emigrants, conscious of 'home' (143).

Gender Theory

Despite the initial enthusiasm in applying the new feminist discourse to different fields such as feminism, pragmatism and eco-centrism, however, gender studies' forerunners were mainly concerned with the analysis of white female oppression (Ellena128), thus ignoring the issue of femininity in its link with racism and colonization within postcolonial frames. As a consequence, this initial narrow perspective has been largely criticized, in particular by scholars such as Bell Hooks in *Ain't a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. It was Mohanty (1984), who denounced the so-called 'white feminism' and led a new development of the field with the aim to include also women from "Third World" into the feminist discourse. This postcolonial feminist wave has significantly re-shaped the approach to literature in particular.

Today, the interest of feminist academic research has established a wider approach by including a postcolonial perspective that considers the social, cultural and political implications of black femininity and sexuality. Henderson (2010), also postulates a gender and feminist perspectives within the post-colonial period and includes the black women as part of his gender ideology. In *“Imagining the Black Female Body. Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture”*, he outlines what he terms as *“making clear black female in gender ideology”* (10). The theorists have each advanced peculiar perspectives that consider the parameter in which migration and diaspora should be discussed as well as black feminism. The texts under study, Adichie's *Americanah* and Atta's *A Bit of Difference*, present succinct portraiture of the ideology.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Americanah*

Adichie's *Americanah* is a book that explores many issues, such as race, immigration, gender, education, etc. Adichie points out certain aspects of life in the Western world that many people choose to ignore, such as inequality within the society (e.g. there are still certain expectations of women that do not apply to men) and prejudiced attitude towards black people. She does that in the novel by means of the dialogues, inner monologues or the main protagonist's blog. Her characters are often conflicted and uncertain, looking for a place where they belong. The novel also celebrates different kinds of love including love for family members, as well as romantic love. Elizabeth Day, in her review of *Americanah* in *The Guardian* says about the novel in the following statement *“There are some stories that tell a great story and others that make you change the way you look at the world. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah is a book that manages to do both”* (Day 4). This refers to the fact that by pointing out contemporary problems of the world, Chimamanda makes the readers think and even change about their own attitude towards these issues.

The novel is partly autobiographical, as Adichie, similarly to the main character, went to study in the U.S. Though she did not face as many difficulties, one can still find some similarities, e.g. when Ifemelu realises that she is black when she comes to America. In many interviews Chimamanda mentions her feelings towards a black man in the U.S. who called her *“sister”*. She has not been in America long and felt unpleasantly surprised with a strange man addressing her with such familiarity. It was in

America where Adichie realised that being black comes with assumptions about her background, social status, etc. Her skin colour led the man to a conclusion that they share similar life experience, which in his eyes was enough reason to act familiar.

There are many flash-backs in the story and it is told from the point of view of two main protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze. The plot follows the lives of four major characters: Ifemelu, Obinze, Auntie Uju and Dike. All of them are immigrants, either the first, or as in the Dike's case, second generation. Dike was born in the U.S., is an American citizen but finds it hard to identify with other Americans because his mother is from Nigeria and he has never known his father. Ifemelu, the main protagonist of the story, is a legal immigrant, who goes to the U.S. to study but faces difficulties in finding a job. The reader follows her development from early age until she reaches adulthood. Ifemelu followed Auntie Uju into the U.S., who became a U.S. citizen due to the fact that she gave birth to her son, Dike, in America. After an unfortunate attempt to follow Ifemelu into the U.S. Obinze, with his mother's help, succeeds in getting the visa to the UK but later becomes an illegal immigrant there, which makes his situation the most difficult one.

The novel describes problems immigrants face while trying to obtain a visa. It follows the newcomers during first few years and provides a commentary of how it might be difficult, not only physically but mentally, to accommodate to the new environment. In the end, there is a reunion for Ifemelu both with the homeland and with her first love, Obinze. Ifemelu finds that immigration helped her to realise where she belongs. Adichie commented on her novel during her "Tenement Talk," on *Tenement Museum*: "I wanted this book to be about not so much leaving home but going home, and the many homes, and what home means". Even though throughout the book, one reads about immigration, in the end it comes down to finding where the protagonists belong and where they feel at home. Intertextuality plays a significant role in the novel. It serves as an illustration of the protagonists' characters by means of showing their preferences in literature. For example, Obinze's obsession with American books and films, such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Cosby Show*, indicates from the very beginning his longing for a world with more opportunities.

Sefi Atta: *A Bit of Difference*

Sefi Atta's novel *A Bit of Difference* is set in contemporary England and tells a story of a woman, Deola, who comes from Nigeria to Britain, for self-realisation and the fear of fitting in into an environment racially oriented and not gender friendly. Similar to *Americanah*, the novel is told in ich-form. It has many flash-backs, which makes the story more intriguing by unfolding major events gradually. The usage of ich-form in both novels makes the reader more engrossed in the story, making it more intriguing as well as authentic.

The novel portrays a major character: Deola (Adeola). Deola is a young woman, who works with LINK, an international charity organisation, who are interested in giving Aids to low economic countries. She is the director of internal audit and moves to and fro Britain, U.S, and Nigeria, to see to LINK's funding of some projects. But she is a young adult woman who is at a crossroads of her life as she feels pressured about whether or not to start a family. Right from her time in Nigeria, growing up as the first daughter of her rich parents, Deola shows a determined female character, one who does not want to ride on the fame of her parents' wealth. Her readiness to move out of Nigeria, after the death of her father, her resignation of her position as an account officer, in Trust Bank, owned by her father, were all part of her self-realisation.

While in London, she moves from one work to another and she finally settles within LINK, she struggles with her identity as an immigrant. She never had doubts about her identity anywhere. She definitely does not see herself as British. Perhaps she is a Nigerian expatriate in London. Subu, on the other hand, battles with her identity and is determined not to return home. This explains Okpewho's (2001) idea of "*diaspora apart*" model and Butler's "*diaspora plus home*" model. Their position and identity show how the writer weaves essentialist ideology through the lives of these women. Her life's routine is disrupted when she encounters Wale Adeniran, a widower, during her father's memorial. A one-stand sex with Adeniran ignites a change in her feeling of returning home when she discovers she is pregnant. Deola's mother sees this as a good start for her daughter, for at least, she will settle down. Deola becomes afraid of her life with a man. Jaiye, her sister is not enjoying her marriage. Ivie's marriage to Omoroige is seen as no marriage. These troubling situations in her sisters' marriages bring fear to her. On her return

home to Nigeria, she meets Adeniran and when he mentions marriage, Deola retorts, "Married? Who said? No one will force me to do anything. At my age you're just a donor" (A Bit of Diff... 233). Deola, here, exhibits the dynamics in gender imbalance by not seeing marriage as a defining factor for womanhood.

Gender Imbalance and Dynamics in the Narratives

Further theme that echoes the topic of Western influence upon Nigerian culture in postcolonial literature, is gender and feminism, as females are treated differently in the societies captured in the two stories. Their narratives showcase relationships across ethnic, religious, racial, and gender lines, thus blurring cheap dichotomous categorizations of persons.

Adichie considers herself a feminist and her books reflect the life of women both in Nigeria and in diaspora, as seen in her experience. She gave a speech on this topic on the occasion of one of the Ted events where she explained her views on this matter and called herself a "happy African feminist". By creating contrasting female characters, she compares their life styles and illustrates how traditional Nigerian women, whose primary goal in life is to please a man, tend to become dependent on men. In the novels this work treats, the main protagonists are mostly strong, independent women who are capable of making decisions for themselves. In Adichie's *Americanah* the main character, Ifemelu, challenges the traditional idea of a Nigerian woman by speaking her mind and pursuing her needs and wishes instead of obeying and pleasing her partners. It must be noticed that the protagonist is perceived as subverting gender norms in particular in the Nigerian context both in her adolescence and adulthood. Adichie thus, confirms perhaps the black gender and feminist agitations that contemporary diaspora African female writers evince. *Americanah's* other character, Kosi, on the other hand, is an embodiment of traditional Nigerian woman, who embraces her role as mother and wife, which leads to misunderstanding between her and her husband, and eventually culminates in humiliation, which she throws herself into, and divorce.

Another major change in the contemporary wave of African immigrants worldwide is the significant increase of its female immigrant population. As Pauline Ada Uwakweh contends, the last quarter of the twentieth century has seen clear gender shifts in African immigrant patterns. In fact "the African

migration pattern has been a gendered phenomenon” because “prior to the sixties, the quest for the 'white man's education' was the primary facilitator of male emigration in colonial and postcolonial African nations. But now, the female emigrate and the pattern has changed. And this is what is noticed in Henderson's (2010) case for the black feminist discourse.

We see also as Sefi Atta represents Deola (Adeola), as an independent woman, in *A Bit of Difference* (2013). She does not see marriage as a way to define a woman. She can attain her self-worth without attaching it to a man. She considers even the societal imbalance that affects women in the world as a result cultural difference. Women in the U.S. and UK undergo certain changes due to the structure of the states as well as cultural differences. The divorce rate in America is much higher than in Nigeria because there are laws protecting women in America .According to Deola, “marriages in government circles are like Nollywood scripts” (ABoD 107).Ivie, Deola's maternal cousin paints clear picture of how men treat their wives in her conversation with Deola:

Uju: “They give their wives rat poison. One man I know did it and he got hold of his wife's inheritance... you have to be careful these days. They don't care. As for the women, they've gone nuclear. If you can't provide, they will see someone on the side who can. It's true! Alternative energy source!”

Deola: “so, there are no normal couples here?”

Uju: “My dear, everyone is sleeping around...we now have single women party in Nigeria”.

Deola: “Na wa for Naija's marriages” (A Bit of Diff... 107-108).

What we perceive from this conversation is the imbalance in the treatment of women by men and the women's strive to live by their own dictates and change the status quo ante. They are conscious of the circumscribing situation they find themselves. The pressure to get married and settle down. Deola makes this out of her and Subu's situation:

...the pressure to marry is relentless. Being single is like trying to convince a heckling audience your act is well worth seeing...her mother tells her to come home...find a man to settle down with (ABoD 37).

But what happens between Deola and Tosan, her first boyfriend speaks volume of the extent to which the women want to live life without much dependency on men, “*stop shouting. You're always shouting. There is no need to shout.....she punched him*” (ABoD 41).

Some immigrants from Nigeria, however, choose different explanation. One of Uju's boyfriends argues that women in America become wild. When it comes to the subject of taking money from wives, he takes the side of the West: “What is wrong with a man wanting financial security from his wife? Don't women want the same thing?” (*Americanah* 117).

His approach to gender equality is unilateral. He only seeks advantage for himself, bending his identity and beliefs from being a conservative Nigerian who thinks women should listen to their husbands to being an American who thinks men and women should work equally. Ifemelu does not run foul with him but writes about this case in her blog, thus using language as a “way of fighting male dominance”

(Procházka 120). This is similar to Lucie Irigaray's approach, “she deals with the specific relationship of women to language and writing as the possibility of making the difference” (123). For a long time, women's opinion was not recognised by society but thanks to writing they can spread their views without the readers realising that it is a woman who wrote it. By making their pieces of work anonymous women escape prejudiced views against their writing. According to Uwakweh, “African female writers have since begun the task of representing the challenge specific to their migrant fellows in a variety of literary genres”(4) that “represent African immigrants of differing backgrounds and professions as they contend with their global spaces.

The female figures in *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference* make one redefine the conception of women's role in society. Women in the two novels “start to search for their own sexual and cultural identity, rejecting the symbolical roles and subject positions created for them by male authority” (Procházka 121). By creating Ifemelu and Deola, Adichie and Atta illustrate that there is more to women than their role as mothers and wives. They “revise the traditional paradigm” and restore “the female perspective” by creating female characters whose life does not revolve around men, family and

children, (Gardiner 629), quoted in Khazanovych (2016).

Despite Adichie's attempts to indicate that brain and speaking one's mind is women's main advantage, the fact that Ifemelu cares so much about her hair and that one of the groups which has a chance of surviving in the refugee world is beautiful women, indicate that women in nowadays world, despite feminists' contribution, are still judged and valued by their appearance.

It is also important to mention that women's contribution to the world is not measured in the same way as men's. Atta shows how women and their actions aren't taken seriously when Anne says, "*the networks in general don't credit women with any intelligence*" (ABoD 19). It can be an allusion to the fact that before in Europe, in order for the woman's voice to be heard in court, two women had to testify to the same thing or only one man. This situation can also be interpreted in a way that the Kimberly's husband wanted Ifemelu to recognise him as superior and to obey him because that would be the only way for her to be recognised by the white society that she lived in for a couple of years and where she did not feel accepted. It is also possible that the man simply does not hold women accountable for the situation in the world, for racism or for Nigeria's financial situation.

Adichie and Atta's characters reflect the complexities of the diasporic experience and the evolving relation between individuals and nationhood. Their writings, as many others from the mentioned third generation, works towards the reformulation of the idea of nation and national belonging. Adichie and Atta problematize the idealization of the American and European Dream, contrasting it with migrant's experiences. The lives of Ifemelu and Deola, the protagonists of these texts paint a vivid picture of changing the imbalance in gender and bringing about dynamism in consort with third generation diasporic writers. At the same time, their characters show ambiguous reminiscences of home. Nigeria appears as a reconstructed memory, often seen as a distant reality, or even a heavy burden to carry (as it is for the exemplified characters above). However, the migrants in Adichie and Atta's stories seem to be unable to fully disconnect their lives from their Nigerian origins and always feel somehow displaced both from Nigeria and the US. In Braga and Gonçalves'(2014) words:

they have ambiguous recollections of Nigeria: on the one hand, Nigeria lacks jobs, university opportunities and

equality between sexes; on the other hand, it is the familiar territory in which they know how to face adversities. In a state of permanent hesitation, they wish to stay in the United States and United Kingdom and return to Africa at the same time (Braga & Gonçalves, 2).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Adichie and Atta are trying to show a different view on women who are not entirely dependable on men but can create their own destinies. They create female characters, that can change the world by taking action. More importantly, Adichie and Atta portray African immigrant women as active subjects in their diasporic communities. Their fictions also scrutinize the ways in which gender continues to define the African diasporic woman's identity both in the West and in her home country, particularly how gender dynamics operate within the power structures of class and economic wealth for the women. Adichie and Atta's diasporic characters become fictional representations of the aching for self-definition within fragmented identities and discourses.

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*Diasporic Experience, Gender Dialogue and the Dynamics of Cultural Encounter
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