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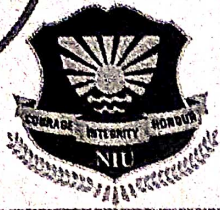
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TRAUMA OF MIGRATION: A CRITICAL STUDY ON CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Abstract:

The theme of migration and its consequences occupies a significant place in the contemporary post colonial writings. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* highlights this topic prominently. The novel deals with the strange experiences of the emigrants and their inexplicable happiness when they return to their home land. This paper makes an earnest effort to depict how African emigrants strive to accept, adjust and confirm their identity in places where they are relegated to a low and specific type of people. However, due to various inevitable reasons, they endeavour to become united with the alien land. Adichie's *Americanah* elaborately narrates the psychological agony of the emigrants in the midst of the natives and finally concludes that the trauma of migration lingers permanently in the minds of the emigrants.

Key words: Trauma, Identity, Migration, Exile, Otherness.

Trauma of Migration: A Critical Study on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prominent Nigerian writer who has successfully demonstrated her talent as a great writer by creating number of appealing and informative novels, short stories and prose works. By her free flowing prose and sensational and touching characters, she has become very popular and outspoken artist during 2013. Thus she has become one of the most popular writers of Nigerian as well as African literature to the contemporary era. She along with other African writers, has taken African literature to the next level.

Adichie's third novel *Americanah*, primarily deals with the issues of African immigrants and their racial problems. The novel narrates how Nigerian immigrants miserably have failed in their attempt to succeed a happy life. It elaborately describes how difficult it is to survive against the background of identity crisis that includes race, colour and hair differences. Their problems are observed painfully by Adichie who advocated revolution through her painful writing.

Americanah narrates the tragic experiences of the emigrants who return their own land after facing unexplainable sufferings in the silent land. Even though they made earnest effort to get themselves adapted with the new environment, they encounter trauma as they are psychologically, socially and culturally different from them.

The novel belongs to the genre of post colonial traumatic fiction, which exposes the cultural collective trauma where individual trauma becomes a subsidiary. Collective trauma is different from the classical traditions of trauma because the collective trauma is not centred on a particular tragic event. It portrays the physical as well as psychological wounds of a community. But the repercussion of this community trauma will equally affect each and every individual.

In *Americanah*, the protagonist gets involved with various social matters. Her relationship with other gender becomes unavoidable but it is not smooth and happy. She suffers from a sense of identity

crisis. Adichie utilises the theme of migration as a door through which she exposes the other issues. She knows that race and gender play a vital role in shaping one's experience. By profoundly analysing the various of the African immigrants, the novel vividly shows how gender and race affect the immigrant's status economically and culturally.

Post colonial literature of the present era takes up migration and its consequences in many of its works. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie *Americanah* elaborately discusses the topic of migration. Her skilful approach to the theme of migration has made her the spokeswoman of the Transnational Africans and their rights. This paper aims to analyse this factor and narrates the issues related to it.

Expecting free and happy future, Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel, migrated to America. After settling in the alien land, she found herself in a state of marginalization. The proud American, marginalized and discriminated the Africans in the name of race, colour and culture. Ifemelu resorted to the western trails expecting some respect and sympathy from the native people.

The characters in the novel wage a constant battle against the exploitation and discrimination coming from the people of the free land. They are forced to fight against the internal and external conflicts. The result of their encounter decide their fate. Some managed to get a happy ending. Some miserably end with failure.

The word 'Americanah' is used by a Nigerian friend of Ifemelu. In order to show that she lived in the united states of America, she uses the term to all her friends and relatives. The word indirectly reveals the fact that many Nigerians as well as Africans have lost their identity and they can never come back to their original state. Their cultural changes will also remain the same. Adichie explains, "They roared with laughter, at that word "Americanah," wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke" (65).

In the novel, Adichie narrates the corrupted and social vices practiced in Nigeria. Nigeria is a gifted country with enormous mineral and forest resources. It also has rare diamonds. But corruption has spoiled the entire system of the country. The social vices like bribery, exploitation, discrimination, male domination have totally destroyed Nigeria. Thus Adichie's novel explicitly shows the current unpleasant situation in Nigeria. Hence every man in the land longs to escape to foreign countries. Obinze is also caught in the same situation and he too wants to leave Nigeria and settle in other country. Thus it has become a psychological crisis for him. Obinze's mother desperately tried to get visa for her son. She thought that London could also give such psychological cure to her son. She did everything possible for the redemption of her. In the process she lost her identity and self-confidence.

In the beginning, Obinze dreams to go to America and live happily there. In the later stage, he dismisses the idea of leaving Nigeria. He regains confidence and believes that he can enjoy a happy life in his own country. To go to America, one has to obtain many fraudulent certificates, a faked ID card, a sham green card of marriage. Seeing all these hardships, Obinze resolved to stay in Nigeria. Maxwell said "a valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement". Luckily Obinze becomes rich by entering real estate business in Nigeria.

Every African woman feels proud of their thick and curly hair. It stands as a symbol of their culture and environment. At the start of her life in America, Ifemelu goes to the beauty parlour to braid her hair. For Ifemelu, hair stands for her self-confidence and identity. At first she decides to relax her hair instead of having it in braids. This will give her a look of western style and professional outlook.

In the process of changing her hairstyle, she gets the smell of her hair burning. Adichie narrates, "Ifemelu felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu's head bent backwards against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head" (203). She feels that she loses her freedom and

confidence while confirming to western style of beauty. She thinks that her identity and culture has lost along with her natural hair.

The novel focuses how Nigerian immigrants become miserable victims of racism in America. Ifemelu and Curt become lovers in the first phase of the novel. She moves around with Curt keeping her hair natural and unbraided. A black American asks her how is it possible for Curt to be with her hair looks like that. This incident clearly proves how even black men humiliate black woman and think that their hair is less beautiful and less civilized than the whites. In addition to that, Ifemelu painfully remarks that American magazines rarely refer the black women's hair an products and means to update their hair style.

The emotion of apartheid becomes deeply rooted in American society and culture. It becomes a trauma to African immigrants like Ifemelu. Curt takes Ifemelu to different places. Whenever a white woman sees them together, she stares and asks " Why her?". Later Ifemelu comes to know that Curt flirts with other woman via e- mails. She gets humiliated and hurt when she finds out that the other woman is a white, having long loose hair unlike her's.

When Curt comes to know that Ifemelu cheats him, he wishes to know if she has slept with a white as if would have been pardonable with a black one. Thus immigrants from Nigeria are forced to feel themselves inferior because of this colour trauma. In course of time, they accept it as a part of their life.

Harassment and sexual abuse on black women have become cultural thing in America. Though it is an inhuman and unkind act, it has become very common in western countries. When Ifemelu visits public places like market and park, she hears nasty comments related to her colour by whites. Thus black women particularly African women undergo trauma of colour each day. This racial prejudice is very clearly narrated in Adichie's *Americanah*.

Immigrants undergo trauma even due to language issue. Americans expect others to speak wit American accent. Ifemelu met American woman in the international office desk a the university. The women spoke very slowly to Ifemelu. Ifemelu thought she "had to have some sort of illness that made her speak. So slowly" (133). Infact the American woman spoke very slowly because she found that Ifemelu was shocked and she felt like a small child for while.

Americans give high respect of immigrants who spoke in American accent. Knowing this fact Ifemelu too begins to practise American accent. She feels that it gives her a high social class and free access in the common places. Hearing Ifemelu's good American accent, an American appreciates her and encourages her to continue. Ifemelu thanks his positive remarks. Later she feels sorry for her act. Speaking American english hurts her so much that she feels that something is pressing her neck and makes her uncomfortable. Ifemelu takes a vow to maintain her native language to keep up her identity.

Not all immigrants from Nigeria migrate to America as an escape from their own land. Many people long to go to America expecting good job and more security. For Ifemelu, going to America is a dream. She hopes that America will offer peace and happiness. But the clash of the Western and African culture and colour issue demolishes her dream and she decides to go back to Nigeria. She is confident that her native land will accept her and makes her happy and comfortable again.

Back in Nigeria, Ifemelu recollects her past memories. Memories play a indispensable role in cultural trauma since memories naturally bring up the collective community conscious. It reminds them of the past cultural memories that will certainly give them a relief from trauma. Ifemelu longs to go back to her young life when she has been bold, happy and peaceful even in the midst of many struggles.

Ifemelu meets her friends and relatives expecting that such meetings will take her to the past life in Nigeria when she has been one with the environment and society. But coming back to Lagos does not make her homely and acceptable. She comes to know that she has become a stranger in her own country and she finds very difficult to understand many things. The passage of time has completely destroyed her identity and she gets no answers to many unknown things. She feels isolated and alienated even from her

own land. Her migration to America has separated her culturally and socially from her own people without redemption.

Ifemelu's expectations and excitement of happy life in native land get broken after she has returned from America. Unlike America, Nigeria is a backward country having no comfortable facilities to live. Even her friends are so much changed. They have started living in Nigeria accepting their hardships as part of life. Nobody has the will to fight against their hurdles for the better life.

When Ifemelu interacts with her people, she comes to know that she is not like them and she does not want to be like them. She realises that something has separated her culturally, mentally and socially from her people. Now she understands her position that she is only a home returned expatriate and she can never become a Nigerian again. Later she writes in the blog that this situation has occurred not only to her but also many others.

Many people return to their homeland hoping that they can live a happy and secure life by starting some business in Nigeria with the money they have earned from abroad. They also decide to marry and start a family life in the places where their parents and ancestors have lived. To their dismay their plans never get fulfilled as Lagos lacks the infrastructure and living standard like New York. But still Lagos maintains its spirit and warmth of the old homeland. Being intelligent, Ifemelu realizes their differences at once and rearranges her plan to her own convenience.

Ifemelu's parents get excited to see her back and love to talk to her. Her relatives also come to meet her expecting some foreign gifts from her. Her friends long to speak to her to know how much she has changed. In all these meetings, Ifemelu feels that she has got separated from them by the long passage of time. A strange feeling of alienation creeps in. She thinks that it can never be wiped out.

Adichie's protagonists wage a stilt and constant battle against the biased environment and vicious forces that deprive them of their social status and alienate them from the developed world. She has narrated many incidents where her characters undergo terrible trauma. The writer expresses the horrible influence of the American environment and society on the Nigerian immigrants. She openly states that America is a racist environment that mercilessly wounds the black immigrants and finally brings doom to their lives.

The author raises her voice against the unfriendly and insecure American environment and earnestly appeals the black immigrants to return to their own motherland. Ifemelu takes the bold step to return to Nigeria and this is the message that Adichie wishes to convey through her novel *Americanah*. All Nigerians should come back to their home land and contribute their share in promoting the welfare of the people and nation.

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