

INTERMITTENT PRESENCES: PERIPHERAL EXISTENCE IN AMERICANAH

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ABSTRACT

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Americanah maps the cultural tensions that immigrants often face. The paper focuses on the concept of self and the other in a multicultural space and how minorities manoeuvre their existence in a hostile environment. Adichie portrays the reality of the diasporic experience which is often disappointing. Loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, isolation, marginalization, exclusion, and dispossession are the highlights of this experience. She explores the notion of identity and how it changes through the lived experiences of her characters

KEYWORDS: *Adichie, Identity, Displacement, Immigration, Multiculturalism, Otherness, Marginalisation, Exclusion*

INTRODUCTION

How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another, how unstable our place – and all because of the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past. There are no Palestinians. Who are the Palestinians? 'The inhabitants of Judea and Samaria.' Non-Jews. Terrorists. Troublemakers. DPs. el pueblo palestino, il popolo palestino, le peuple palestinien – but treated as interruptions, intermittent presences.

-Edward W. Said, After the Last Sky (1986)

Culture is a complex thing. As Raymond William puts it in his Keywords, “culture is one of the two or three words most complicated words in the English language.” He further adds that it is “mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.” However, different cultures have always found a way to coexist. Multiculturalism thus is a distinct human character. Multiculturalism leads to greater understanding of cultural difference, it encourages people to celebrate their own distinctive cultures while opening up space for negotiation and discussion between cultures. The Salad Bowl analogy is a great metaphor for a multicultural society where there is integration of racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological differences while representing and maintaining the distinctiveness of one’s own culture in the larger societal context.

However, plurality often leads to cultural conflicts. The paranoia of losing their identity that the majority feels had led them to believe that any accommodation of plurality is threatening to their homogenous identity and whatever is assimilated is already too much. We can see this in the light of the ongoing debates in India and even the white supremacist narratives in the West. Usually in a multicultural society, the practices chosen to be representative of that culture, are often majoritarian and invisibilises the minorities making them the “Other”. It also doesn’t question the problematic root of the practice itself. For true integration and harmony, one has to go beyond symbolic recognition.

Literature witnesses and documents the processes of assimilation and is a site on which different cultural contestations play out. It brings to the fore the issues of caste, class, gender, religion, and race. Some of the common themes in multicultural literature are themes of identity, isolation, alienation, dislocation, displacement, cultural compromise, otherness, peripheral existence, and discrimination.

PERIPHERAL EXISTENCE IN AMERICANAH

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in her book *Americanah* portrays the reality of the diasporic experience which is often disappointing. Loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, isolation, marginalization, exclusion, and dispossession are highlights of this experience. She explores the question of identity. When placed in a culture that is hostile to your very being, the self undergoes changes, Adichie traces this change through her character, Ifemelu and Obinze. She shows how the negotiations with cultural aspects is how the individual asserts and resists identity. Through her writing she brings to the fore the subaltern who were “hungry for choice and certainty” (276).

Migrants who move to the West have to negotiate their own liminal existence and new forms of marginalisations. We can see this in Obinze’s experience, who goes by someone else’s name to look for work as his visa has expired. Obinze has always dreamed of leaving Nigeria and living in the West but he is soon disillusioned. The racial discrimination, exploitation, humiliation, abysmal working conditions, and always living in fear of being caught has brought out the reality of the immigrant experience. Through him Adichie shows us the peripheral existence that most migrants have. We can attest the traumatic experience of exile and otherness in Obinze’s experience of UK. “You can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don’t even know how fortunate you are” (227). Adichie shows migrants are vulnerable to acts of dehumanization, how their dignity is eroded by the refusal of other people to acknowledge their humanity. The price of survival in the West is the loss of identity.

The yearning for assimilation within a new culture is shown through the experience of Ginika, Ifemelu’s friend. “I didn’t know I was even supposed to have issues until I came to America” (124). When Ifemelu observes her in a party, she is struck by how American Ginika sounds. Ginika has negotiated the space between two cultures. Ifemelu is never fully assimilated unlike Ginika. Ifemelu’s indifference to her host culture leads to her eventual return to Nigeria.

However in her native country a Western passport is something to be revered. People migrating to the West is aspirational. We can see this when Ifemelu’s father says, “At least you are now an American citizen, so you can always return to America” (17). Ifemelu reflects on her own assimilation in the Western culture. She finds herself in a “small but circumscribed world of Curt’s American friends”(222). Even when she meets his mother, it is in an “ornate hotel dining room, full of nicely dressed people, silver-haired couples with their grandchildren, middle-aged women with brooches.....The only black person was a stiffly dressed waiter” (198).

Immigrants are together in their peripheral existence, the feeling of otherness i.e. intermittent presences. Mwombeki says, “you will also find that you might make friends more easily with other internationals , Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than with Americans, both black and white” (140). The bond of trauma holds them together. The experience of migration is not a unidirectional thing, more often than not we think that non-westerners leave the choicelessness of the East and move towards the freedom of the West. But immigrant literature and experience has shown us otherwise. It’s not a unidirectional experience but an oscillation between the good and the bad, like all experiences of a new place.

The novel tells the story of two different migratory experiences and the eventual return to the native land. Obinze lives in the UK on an expired visa and is deported while Ifemelu manages to build a life and career in her host country. Unlike Obinze who is a failed migrant, Ifemelu is a successful migrant who thrives in her host country. The humiliation of deportation and the degradation of self is shown through Obinze's self-imposed isolation, "reeling from what had happened to him in England, still insulated in layers of his own self-pity" (23). Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze is a less fortunate migrant. The constant threat of being discovered made him invisible, "his existence like an erased pencil sketch"(257).

The homeland is an anchor. William Safran in *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, remarks "for diaspora people, their homeland is their ideal home where they or their descendants should eventually return." Moving away leads to a sense of rootlessness in both Ifemelu and Obinze and to overcome this they return. Ifemelu even while in America gradually returns to her origins. She stops relaxing her hair and starts braiding them, which she did in Nigeria before moving to the States. Ifemelu's hair thus becomes the symbol of inherent racism in the American society. Black women are culturally coerced to make their hair look like white women's hair, hair "is the perfect metaphor for race in America" (297). Like Ifemelu, Obinze also returns though his lawyer offers him a way to stay in England for longer, "I'm willing to go back to Nigeria" (279). Their return was a way to end the feeling of rootlessness and to come back to the place they belong to, a return to their own identity.

CONCLUSION

Adichie dexterously captures the hardships that migrants face, the sense of isolation and alienation that comes with being the Other. She posits the dilemma of immigration, displacement, alienation, otherness and discrimination on the landscape of her characters' struggles, providing a human engagement with these issues rather than a statistical or academic one, which can often end up being too clinical. Her portrayal of the travails of the colonised navigating the coloniser's world brings to fore the invisible struggle of the Other, for whom multiculturalism is not merely a socio-cultural and political phenomenon but a deeply personal one. Its nature as an event taking place across the globe must be viewed not only from the lens of the 'native' majority accommodating but arguably more importantly from the perspective of the fragmented Other who has to keep negotiating with their own identity, existence, and aspirations.

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