Diaspora African Women Writers and Postcolonial Thought: A Structural Comparison of *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits and Americanah*

ABSTRACT

Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits (hereafter refers to as Hope) and Americanah display some striking similarities in terms of setting and characterization while they portray some provocative postcolonial preoccupations in terms of human displacement and the question of identity with the characters of both novels struggling to find their way out as they are caught in the complexities of immigration. Drawing upon the theories of postcolonialism and transnationalism, the paper examines the two novels to demonstrate the two writers' perspectives on African diasporic thought concerning postcolonial discourse. In a comparative maneuver and the light of structural and thematic approaches, the study stresses common narrative features and schemes in the two texts. The research reveals that palpable similarities between the two prose narratives appear when we consider how the novelists use specificity rather than generalization as far as setting and characterization are concerned to voice their trepidations concerning the host cultures. However, critical diverging points might be found between the two novels, but that is beyond the scope of the research.

Keywords : Diaspora African women writers, immigration, Adichie, Lalami, postcolonialism, transnationalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Though immigration narratives are not new to African literature, there is a clear demarcation between the early African fiction on human displacement from the periphery to the core and the current stories on the postcolonial subjects' longing for the West along with immigrant life pressure as experienced by those living away from the perceived homeland. Illustrations of early African narratives on travels and border crossing from the postcolony to the West can be found in works such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* or Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. However, these narratives hint only at some cultural clashes within the postcolonial subjects upon their contact with Western cultures. They display sketchy renditions of what it meant to be an African in Europe or America along with the complexities and the politics of immigration. This could be because immigration had not been a hot topic in the West until recently. However, human displacement from Africa to the West has become a serious preoccupation within European immigration policy and many laws have been voted to control or sanction people's movement in the aforesaid direction (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets). Organizations such as IOM strive to stop human border crossing through thoughtful strategies to discourage the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, to better understand some of the reasons why many people from the postcolony abandon their fatherland to venture for a hypothetic future in the West, one would have to take a glance at postcolonial theory along with transnationalism which avails insightful tools to comprehend the dynamics behind immigration from the colonized to the colonizer's land. These theories have made it possible for a critical interpretation of colonial

discourse along with the literature coming from the postcolony which [1] views as lachrymal literature since it strives to resist the injustices and biased cultural practices imposed on the colonized [2]. Many writers engage in this maneuver of representing immigration from the periphery to the core. The texts under investigation illustrate some of the efforts so far made by diasporic African writers to document, albeit fictionally, African immigration and what it meant to be an African immigrant in the West.

With the two novels as tools of socio-political commentary, the two writers challenge the issue of immigration and as [1] cogently pinpoints "every generation of writers confronts the burning issues in its society and wrestles with them" (159). Indeed, Adichie and Lalami wrestle with the issue of race and racism along with identity dilemmas as burning issues that they artistically confront in their craftsmanship. Their novels are postcolonial because as [3] asserts, "the postcolonial novel also engaged with depicting the problematic situation of immigrants which was one of the results of the colonial politics and one of the obvious aftermaths of postcolonial world" (p1001). As such, the interpretation draws on a postcolonial theoretical approach and transnationalism to shed light on issues the writers tackle in the texts under study. Additionally, the paper answers the question: in which way do *Americanah* and *Hope* display literary commonality that avails the writers to depict their concern about African immigration to the West?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonialism avails critics with critical lenses to reflect on how colonial processes and imperialism have given birth to inequality within the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer [2], [4]. As a theory, it stresses this unequal relation by questioning the issue of race and strives to reveal how concerns of race and racism have enabled the imperial powers to reflect, refract, represent, and more importantly, make visible the colonized and their cultures in inferior ways. In doing so, they create in the colonized what [5] is wont to call an "inferiority complex," a complex that would make many people from the postcolonial spaces turn towards the West to realize their unrealized dreams. Postcolonial theorists observe that the West and the 'Rest' are engaged in some cultural practices which appear most often unequal and racialized whereby the colonized is represented while the colonizer (the more powerful in the unequal relationship) does the representation. Many writers have undertaken the task of portrayal of issues related to immigration within well-crafted narratives. To understand how diasporic writing contributes to challenging, subverting, and critiquing, dominant identities and cultures of the host country, key theorists (on postcolonialism and transnationalism) such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Salman Rushdie, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford, to name a few, are considered in the study. In a provocative maneuver, these critics insightfully insist that people's mingling comes with socio-political preoccupations in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, and more.

More insightfully perhaps, [6] observe that the postcolonial is associated with the cultural serfdom imposed by colonialism and all other types of imperial processes from the period of colonization to the present day. To further elucidate some of the permeating characteristics of postcolonial people, they go on to observe that:

> A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, […]. The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of postcolonial societies […]. Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature

> common to all post-colonial works of literature in English (p.9).

[6] continue to pinpoint that "a major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement" (p.8). The idea of "place and displacement" appears one of the major concerns in Lalami's and Adichie's novels. As a result, such terms as "identity," "self," "migration," "displacement," "dislocation," "cultural denigration" and "homeland and hostland" are employed in this work. Additionally, the current paper utilizes the tools found in Postcolonialism, which reveals itself as a critical theoretical approach in literary and cultural studies and calls for "a politics of transformational resistance to unjust and unequal forms of colonial practices" which continue to haunt the colonized in various ways (https://www.academia.edu/2662908/Postcolonialism_A_Brief_Overview).

Since the West represents the core and the postcolonial spaces are viewed as the periphery with all of its turmoil and havoc, many postcolonial subjects (or "those peoples formerly colonized by the West" ([7], p.12) perceived the West as a place where they can realize their smashed dreams while living at the perceived homeland. This feeling has created massive displacement (voluntary and involuntary) from the periphery to the core. In the words of [8], "immigration […] has had its own contradictions: many have been propelled by need, others motivated by ambition, yet others driven away by persecution […]; in many cases need and ambition have become ambiguously and inextricably linked" (86). The current study draws on reflection like that of [8] to not only help understand the contradictions raised by Adichie and Lalami in their immigration narratives but also to reveal critical preoccupations of the two writers within the transnational discourse and understanding diaspora.

3. COMMONALITY IN *HOPE* AND *AMERICANAH*: SPECIFICITY IN SETTING AND CHARACTERIZATION

[9] and [10] can be compared and contrasted in the way the two novels are structured. Indeed, the novelists' careful selection of the setting and characterization and the scope of the narratives presents some commonalities and discrepancies between the two narratives. However, the paper focuses on common features found in the two novels in terms of setting and characterization and how this structural choice matches the novelists' perspective within postcolonial thought.

While comparing the two novels, what quickly comes to mind is the novelists' meticulous and detailed stylistic description of the setting and comprehensive delineation of their characters in the narrative of "place and displacement" as theorized by [6]. Although the themes of the two novels translate worldwide or universal preoccupation wherever social justice is invoked, they are firmly set in specific locations where detailed characters act and react within their surroundings. [9], to start with, is steadfastly set in Morocco (and Spain) with specific cities (Agadir, Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, and Marrakesh) with detailed characters like Aziz, Murad, Halima, and Faten representing ordinary Moroccan people. For the novelist herself, specificity rather than generalization or implicitness in details helps her depict themes that are germane to our contemporary world. In an interview with Andrew Lawless when he asks her: "how important was it for you to ground the story with specific details that the Moroccan setting affords? For example, did you ever consider locating the story in a nameless context between north and south?" Lalami answers: No. I wanted to be as specific as possible, to write about specific characters, facing specific challenges. If the themes translate to a universal dimension, then I think it is precisely because of specificity. What makes a person human in Casablanca is exactly what makes a person human in Madrid or Bogota or Lagos or Shanghai or New York. Thus, the novelist chooses detailed descriptions of precise places and characters to make her point. She uses Morocco and ordinary Moroccan characters to avoid oversimplification to translate common concerns in postcolonial writings.

Similarly, Adichie sets her novel on three specific continents with detailed places and precise characters. Though the narrative starts with America (Princeton), in a flashback technique the novel circles back to Nigeria where the story begins. The young university characters (Obinze and Ifemelu) are first presented in a specific city in Nigeria (Nsukka). Then, the narrator details the socio-political situation in Nigeria in the 1990's under Abacha's regime and specifies the locations like Lagos, Nsukka, and Abuja to help the reader understand what explains the two characters' longing for somewhere else. In the American setting, the novelist avoids implicitness by evoking places like Trenton, Philadelphia, and Princeton to depict her immigrant characters' experience in the West. A similar detailed description appears with London, representing Obinze's immigrant life experience. Thus, with regards to setting, the two writers comparatively cast their story in what postcolonial theorists are wont to call 'the West and the Rest' [2].

Characterization-wise, the novelist employs specific characters with realistic names from Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, America, and England. Her protagonist Ifemelu, an Igbo name, points at the novelist's personal life experience in Nigeria and as an immigrant. Adichie, in her political commentary, imaginatively uses actual names of heads of state like Buhari, Babangida, Abacha, Obasanjo, and Barack Obama to better capture her audience's attention on the issues she raises. Her African characters like Halima, Aisha, and Mariama suggest the continental dimension of immigration and their names connote their cultural belonging. The Western characters too are depicted with such specificity in their names that it is easier for the reader to follow the story and better reflect on race and racism, exclusion and marginalization, which the African immigrant characters suffer as a result of their cultural difference and their interaction with their host culture.

Additionally, there exist connections between the two novels in how they present their immigrant characters' identity and their sense of belonging. Both Lalami and Adichie restrain themselves from showing their characters as members of a diasporic community. If the members of diasporas are self-identified and form communities with connections to the host country and their country of origin ([11]: 43), then the immigrant characters of the two novels can be viewed as simple 'deterritorialized' or 'transnationals' in [12] terms.

More importantly, these characters do not have any affiliation because "membership in the diaspora now implies potential empowerment based on the ability to mobilize international support and influence both the homeland and the hostland" (Clifford, as cited in [11]: 45). In the two novels, only the immigrant characters' struggle for survival away from home is depicted albeit in varying ways. This way of presenting these characters probably shows the novelists' disinterest in forming diasporic communities which in turn can 'mobilize international support and influence both the homeland and the hostland.' There is no immigrant community formation in the two novels. The writers put the task of raising people's awareness on the issues related to immigration (when we consider the 'push' and 'pull' factors and the immigrant suffering) in the hands of individual characters, Ifemelu and Obinze in [10]*;* and Murad, Aziz, and Faten in [9]*.* This attempt might be viewed as the writers' perspectives on the issue of cross-border activities.

Another common element of the two texts appears in their depiction of their immigrant characters' identities. In [10]*,* Ifemelu becomes aware of her blackness and the cultural bias related to it only when she travels to the US. She, nevertheless, struggles to make herself accepted. But, when she realizes that she has to assert herself and her identity, she stops imitating the American accent and straightening her hair (p.173). This marks a turning point in her identity assertiveness, formation, and production. Similarly, Murad in [9], upon his deportation from Spain, understands that his Moroccan identity has to be reinforced in

himself and he has to assert it. He does well in this exercise through his encounter with the two tourists (Chrissa and Sandy) through the Moroccan rug weaving and the story he tells them (pp.179-195).

Interestingly enough, a cultural study scholar, [13] reminds us:

> Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (p.6).

In other words, identity is in a permanent "process of refreshing, renewing, and reforming itself; it is never static" ([11]: 48). The constant fluctuation of identity most of the time results in a sense of belonging. Ifemelu, at the end of the story, understands that she does not belong to America; Nigeria is where she is supposed to be. This could partly explain her steadfastness to return to Nigeria.

In addition, though the two novels make use of educated characters (Western education), they also show ordinary Africans in search of a better life. Similar to Adichie, when we consider Halima, Mariama, and Aisha, Lalami presents less educated ordinary Moroccan characters like Halima and her mother. Both novelists employ a mixture of educated and less educated characters probably to remain realistic because, globally, Africa still has a long way to go as far as Western education is concerned. This aspect of the two novels also points to the similar educational situation in which both North and West Africa find themselves. However, Adichie seems to underscore this problem of Western education by focusing more on her university-educated characters like Ifemelu, Obinze, and the medical doctor, Aunty Uju.

Furthermore, the characters of the two novels exhibit some similarities which recall the connection between postcolonialism and transnationalism. Indeed, the idea of transnational community, [14] contends, also embodies post-colonialism because critical characteristics of postcolonial writings are the "narrative of wanting to go home, to give back to one's home culture, and to help one's family members who remained in the homeland" (p.47). That is, if the immigrant characters of the two novels do not participate in any diaspora community formation, they are engaged in helping their families and express their wish to go home or what [11] called "homing," along with their readiness to give back their learned experience to their homeland. Right at the opening of [10], the reader encounters Ifemelu longing, wanting, and preparing to go home after her thirteen-year stay in the US. Her 'wanting to go home' continues until when she eventually reaches Lagos, which would be understood as her 'true home,' and ultimately starts a new life. Similarly, though not expressed with the same intensity, Aziz in [9] expresses his desire to go home (pp.152-153). And he does return, though for a short period.

In terms of helping the family members who remain in their homeland, most of the immigrant characters of the two novels participate, in one way or the other, in assisting their folks left at their place of origin. In [10], we see, Mariama when "the phone rang again… her voice rising, and she stopped braiding to gesture with her hand as she shouted into the phone. Then she unfolded a yellow Western Union form from her pocket and began reading out the numbers. Trois! Cinq! Non, non, cinq!" (p.11). She now and then has to satisfy some of her parents' requests for money. Likewise in [9], though there has been no word from Halima's brothers, Tarik and Abdelkrim, for a year, they start sending money, "sporadically at first, and later with addicting regularity" (p.75). Thus, these immigrant characters not only share the desire to aid their place of origin through remittance but also show some willingness to

repatriate at various levels. Their feeling of connectedness with their homeland as expressed above constitute one of the features of transnationalism which is also found in postcolonial writing as [14] argues. Therefore, beyond their transnational belonging, the two novels are intrinsically postcolonial since they artistically and critically participate in the postcolonialism and transnationalism debate.

Structure-wise, both Lalami, and Adichie employ non-linear narratives instead of a linear sequencing of the plot. Indeed, while they offer a graphic reflection on immigration and the questions it raises, the way they structure their works calls for careful and sustained reading to figure out the missing links in the stories. [9], for instance, begins with "The Trip," an episode in which the narrator relates the means used by the immigrant characters to cross the Mediterranean Sea and the harsh conditions of the crossing. Their turmoil includes: the clandestine passengers embarking on an overloaded inflatable Zodiac; the Sea is cold and dark as the travelers depart at night; the passengers are left to cater for themselves some meters before they reach the Spanish mainland as the Zodiac capsizes; and the bad treatment they suffer at the immigration station. It is only later on that the novelist flashes back to present the life of the immigrant characters before and after the trip.

In a similar vein, [10], opens with what appears to be the end of the narrative. The reader meets the protagonist, Ifemelu when she has been in America for thirteen years and she is getting ready to repatriate in chapter 1. Likewise, Obinze is introduced in the novel in chapter 2 when he is already rich “sitting in the back of his Range Rover in the still Lagos traffic” (p.19). The reason why Ifemelu wants to move back to Lagos and what makes her leave Nigeria in the first place is revealed only later in the narrative. Also, how Obinze becomes rich and his travel to London, and his deportation are delayed in the novel. Though this technique, that is, disrupt narrative technique, has been employed by early African novelists like Achebe in his *No Longer at Ease*, [15], the two novelists seem to perpetuate it with outstanding dexterity.

Furthermore, the characters' conscious discovery and understanding of themselves is another common feature of the two novels. Before their immigration, most of these characters do not understand what it meant to be from a country with a history of colonization. Murad, for instance, could not understand "how fourteen kilometers could separate not just two countries but two universes" (p.1). Similarly, Ifemelu realizes that it is only when she travels to the US that being black means something to her. When she was in Nigeria, before her immigration experience, her blackness is not significant to her. In both novels, immigration has helped the characters to grow intellectually and to redefine and reposition their identity. These novels recall some sort of 'Bildungsroman' (a novel about the physical, [16].

This aspect is more pronounced, however, in [10] where we see Ifemelu in the closing scenes as a mature woman asserting her personality and her readiness to establish herself in Nigeria, her native homeland. As for Obinze, "even when he thinks about leaving Nigeria he thinks just about "America, only America" (p.182). But, when American immigration officials deny giving him a visa and he desperately turns toward Britain, he seems to lose his proclivity toward America and changes his mind about his first decision. After his stay in London, when he is back in Nigeria, Obinze shows some growth in his personality and identity assertiveness. At one of his friends’ parties, he objects to some women who glorify Western education at expense of theirs. He intercedes and asserts, "didn't we all go to primary schools that taught
the Nigerian curriculum?" (p.29). This observation indicates his ideological maturity and his inclination toward his 'Nigerianess.’ Interestingly enough, while the immigrant characters of the two novels face the consequence of the choices they make, they inhabit heterogeneous

transnational spaces within which their identities, [11] argues, are “in a perpetual process of refreshing, renewing, and reforming” (p.47).

In short, setting and characterization-wise, rather than delving into geopolitical generalization (South vs. North), the two novelists have favored specification and "translocality” [17] which appear common structural features of the two novels. Lalami refuses to employ North Africa and Europe as her setting but specifies Morocco and Spain; equally, Adichie uses Nigeria, America, and London instead of West Africa and the West in her narrative. While the settings of the novels differ in terms of location, the use of specificity in setting and characterization helps the novelists achieve realism. Drawing on [18] observation in which he asserts that a novel "is realistic if it deals with issues and modes of conduct applicable to human beings and if the author, by using certain techniques convinces us that the world he has created is a world of ordinary human beings and ordinary human activity," this study maintains that the two novels are realistic (p.3). They have attempted to make their stories true to life and the world they have created 'is a world of ordinary human beings.' They focus on specificity and distrust
large abstractions which would throw their narratives in vague generalizations which would deter their effort to achieve verisimilitude. Their techniques and craftsmanship sometimes make the readers find themselves in a serious dilemma to draw the line between fiction and fact, between imagination and reality. This effort, on the side of the novelists, contributes to making their works unarguably postcolonial because one of the features of the postcolonial novel is realism [19]. Both [9] and [10] are set beyond one continent; that is to say, their settings are ‘translocal’ in which their transnational characters dwell. This stylistic choice matches well the writers’ thematic concerns on immigration from the periphery to the center in postcolonial discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper attempts to investigate, at the levels of setting and characterization, some of the striking similarities the two novels present. Major commonalities between the two narratives appear concerning their artistic use of specificity at the expense of blurred generalization regarding characterization and setting. All the characters in both novels dwell in a specific setting which can be viewed as 'translocales.’ The novelists’ employment of conspicuous specificity speaks to their realistic rendition of immigration stories from the periphery as opposed to the overarching and biased Western media depiction of African immigrants dying for the West.

In both novels, the study highlights, the reader meets a mixture of postcolonial immigrant characters who depart from their homeland to the West in an attempt to fulfill their unmet aspirations and desires. They realistically represent the ordinary postcolonial subjects who have been treated more humanely in the novels as opposed to the debasement that many people from the postcolony suffer in the biased misrepresentations from the Eurocentric writers. In doing so, the writers have made an outstanding contribution to the postcolonial theoretical corpus since they insightfully call for a ‘politics of transformational resistance’ to unequal and unjust colonizer’s maneuvers [20]. The characters in the two novels display some universal emotions which reflect the novelists' tactful understanding of the human condition. They are, so true-to-life, with their failings and ambitions, and portrayed with universal drive, that we sometimes identify with them. Both Lalami and Adichie are inspired by postcolonial theory's engagement with writing on the issues that are germane to the postcolony and representation as expressed by [21], [22], [23], and [24]. If “the postcolonial condition implies the location of subjects between historical, cultural and temporal spaces,” as [15] observes, then [9] and [10] have artistically ‘documented this condition’ (p.iii).

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