

Cultural Displacement, Hybridity and Postcolonial Mimicry in Selected Nigerian Migration Fiction

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Abstract

Several postcolonial migration narratives reveal that the pressing need to subsist in a new environment predisposes the African immigrant to changes which affect almost every aspect of life. Such changes may entail adopting a lifestyle of mimicry in order to fit into the mores of the host society. The result of this scenario can be a mindful or unconscious loss of the individual's native values and the prevalence of the foreign values. Thus, the migrant may become a product of neither his native world nor that of his new world, and the struggle to maintain both values simultaneously may create what most literary critics explain as hybridity. This research adopts the postcolonial theory in studying the traces and results of mimicry, cultural displacement and hybridity as it affects the migrant characters depicted in Micheal Afenfa's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon*, Helon Habila's *Travelers*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*; all of which are migration novels written by postcolonial Nigerian authors. The research argues that even in a foreign abode, the migrants should endeavor to uphold their native culture because this is a sure way of maintaining a balanced identity while they are abroad and even when they eventually return home.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, mimicry, cultural displacement, cultural assimilation and hybridity.

Introduction

The tendency to tilt one's mores towards those of the host has been observed to characterize the 21st century African migrants. In most cases, it is regarded by the migrant as a profitable strategy for surviving the downsides of migration experience but at some points in the individual's migration ventures, a complete return to the initial values may become difficult or even impossible. These cases produce an individual who eventually is neither home to his nativity nor to his host society. Even in cases of physical return to the migrant's homeland, the struggle to return to or maintain the former native norms creates a sense of unhomeliness in the individual.

Postcolonial literature has been explained in diverse ways by critics. Some regard it as a literature which analyses the experiences of formerly colonized people or societies even after the exit of the colonizers. For Ann Dobie, postcolonial literature is the literature written in English by people in formerly colonized countries, some of it authored by the colonizers and their descendants, but more of it by those they colonized. The subject matter of postcolonial literature is marked by its concern for ambiguity or loss of identity. Written by culturally displaced people, it investigates the clash of cultures in which one deems itself to be superior and imposes its own practices on the less powerful one (*Theory into Practice*, 207).

The migration texts chosen for this work underscore the experiences of migrant characters who suffer physical, identity and cultural displacement as a result of their relocation to countries in Europe and America; where almost everything about them is deemed immaterial by their host society. Thus, the values of the host are imposed on them, plunging them into assimilating those of the seemingly powerful ones.

Helon Habila's *Travelers* tells the story of characters whose migration from African countries to places like Berlin,

United Kingdom, America as well as their encounters with the natives of such countries change their whole notion of their original African culture. These characters like the unnamed narrator who hails from Nigeria, Gina his wife who is an American, Mark who is a Malawian and the others from Burkina Faso and so on are representatives of the African continent. Their reasons for migrating from their homeland to the foreign countries include insecurity, the need for a better standard of education, harsh economic conditions and many others. These factors reveal the prevailing effects of colonialism on their societies even in a postcolonial era.

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* narrates the anxieties of characters from African countries like Nigeria, Liberia and Uganda, who encounter such incidents as poverty, sexual exploitation, unemployment and other problems in their postcolonial societies. These predicaments influence their decisions to migrate to Belgium. However, their mingling with people in Belgium leads to their assimilation of the foreign ways of life at the expense of their native norms. Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* reveals the failures of the Nigerian postcolonial society which are products of the colonial legacies. Thus, such issues as unemployment, decline in the nation's standard of education, financial difficulties and so many others become reasons for which the major characters migrate to America. In their new abode, they face various forms of displacement and new forms of colonialism from the natives of their host country. Micheal Afenfia's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon* depicts the miserable conditions of individuals in a postcolonial Nigerian society for which they migrate to Canada. Owoicho the protagonist suffers the sad realities of insecurity in Nigeria, in which his wife and three children are killed on the same day. For other characters like Damiete, Bimpe, Oroma, and Obinna; unemployment, a failing education standard and financial difficulties rouse their desire to leave Nigeria. While they live in Saskatoon, these migrant characters in the novel get exposed to

displacements for which most of them become a hybridized version of their original self.

It is remarkable that the writers of these four novels underscore similar issues which reoccur in different decades after the exit of the colonialists from various African countries. These issues expose the failures of most postcolonial African societies for which individuals feel frustrated and prefer to engage in transnational migration. Shockingly, their target destinations are countries of those who once colonized and marginalized them in diverse ways. Furthermore, their relocation to such places make them vulnerable to more instances of marginalization under which they have no other option than to forfeit their real worth in order to survive.

It is based on these considerations that the postcolonial theory has been adopted as a framework for this research paper. The postcolonial theory according to Pourjafari Fatemeh and Abdolali Vahidpour, 'has its roots in the frustrations of the colonized and tensions and clashes between their culture and that of the dominant group. It also deals with the oppressed group's fears, hope and desires for their future and their own identities, and by regarding them as individuals worthy enough to be discussed and talked about, it gives them the authority and political and cultural freedom to gain independence by overcoming political dominance (*The Dawn Journal*, 683). These frustrations, tensions and clashes between the cultures are often divulged by various postcolonial literature with the issue of migration forming their major focus.

Mitchell Philip Irving explains that the term postcolonialism is: broadly a study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is concerned with both how European nations conquered and controlled "Third World" cultures and how these groups have since responded to and resisted those encroachments.

Postcolonialism, which is both a body of theory and a study of political and cultural change, has gone and continues to go through three broad stages: a) initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority enforced by being in a colonized state; the struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy; and a growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity (1).

The stages of postcolonialism which are highlighted by Irving confirm the earlier assertion that the unpleasant experiences of people in most societies after the colonial era lure them into the delusion that life outside their homeland is more palatable. However, some of them discover that such notion is a mirage as they arrive their host destinations and are treated as inferior beings. As such, they begin to feel displaced and unaccepted in such abodes. They therefore, tend to mimic the seemingly superior culture of their hosts. Based on this premise, one can state that mimicry, cultural displacement, hybridity and unhomeliness are common concepts which are associated with the experiences of postcolonial African migrants.

Mimicry

Mimicry is a notable concept which draws the attention of many critics of migration literature, especially as it relates to the postcolonial factors which surround or influence migration. Mimicry in colonial and postcolonial literature is most commonly seen when members of a colonized society imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonizers (say, British or the French). In the context of immigration, mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Presumably, while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one's own cultural identity, though in some cases, immigrants and colonial subjects are left with a dominant foreign culture that there may not be a clear preexistent identity to

suppress (Amardeen Singh, 3).

In another sense, Ann Dobie posits that: “colonial subjects practice mimicry-imitation of dress, language, behavior, and even gestures instead of resistance” (208). In the light of the migration narratives under study, most of the characters tend to imitate the lifestyles and norms of the people they meet in their new environment, even when such norms negate those of their native countries. In Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu one of the major characters begins to enjoy different types of drinks just like her boyfriend Curt. She does this in order to play along and maintain her relationship with the American companion even while her conscience reminds her that such practice negates her moral standard:

With Kurt, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth. “A drink” became part of the architecture of her life, mojitos and martinis, dry whites and fruity reds. She went hiking with him, kayaking, camping near his family's vacation home, all things she would never have imagined herself doing before. She was lighter and leaner; she was Curt's Girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favorite, flattering dress, she laughed more because he laughed so much. His optimism blinded her. (229)

Furthermore, other characters like Bartholomew and Ginika get so engrossed in mimicking the white skin that they consider their black skin unacceptable. So, they engage in bleaching their skin. This creates a strong dislike in Ifemelu towards Bartholomew, so she expresses her disgust to Aunty Uju in the novel: “He uses bleaching creams” couldn't you see? His face is a funny color. He must be using the cheap ones with no sunscreen. What kind of man bleaches his skin, *biko*?” (140).

In Helon Habila's *Travelers*, the unnamed protagonist who is also the narrator in the novel marries an American artist named Gina, and they move to Berlin in Germany where she applies for her Zimmer art Fellowship and attends art competitions. But as Gina loses her seven months old pregnancy, their sweet marriage suddenly turns pale, boring and full of loneliness. Thus, the narrator resorts to hanging out with fellow Africans at different parts of Berlin and this exposes him to a life of mimicry. He, confesses his new lifestyle:

I had met others like them here in Berlin, at readings, on the train, young men and women, in threadbare sweaters and tattered jeans, mostly living in communes in abandoned buildings, purveyors of an alternative way of life, often not agreeing on what exactly that alternative should be, just an alternative status quo, otherwise what was the point? I drank, and smoked and listened... Even in my tipsy, sedated state, I sensed how ephemeral this moment was (13).

The narrator's mimicry is not just an imitation of the lives or values of the natives of his new abode, it is also a survival strategy in the midst of some unwelcome changes which make him uncomfortable. He confesses these earlier challenges which lure him into mimicking the lifestyle of the other migrants:

But we got married, and it was a good marriage, stable, we had our routines, like most married people, we woke up together, we went to work, ... Two months after our marriage, Gina got pregnant. We hadn't planned on that, and we certainly hadn't foreseen losing the pregnancy after just seven months. Devastating for both of us, but something shifted in Gina. She stopped going out; she cried all day; she stopped eating. Gina was sleeping all day—she wouldn't wake up till late afternoon when

she'd emerge looking drawn and ethereal only to grab a sandwich from the fridge. I was left alone to stumble from place to place, mostly art galleries and libraries. (8-9).

The narrator begins to engage in the activities of those with whom he spends more time, even though these are not his original lifestyle.

For some characters in Afenia's own novel, mimicry becomes a means of blending in a new and somewhat unwelcoming environment. For this reason, Bimpe who is one of the characters chooses a name which will suit the Canadian accent without being mindful of the distortion it brings to her original name and its meaning. The novel reveals her bold declaration of what she gains by distorting her real name:

All I'm saying is that Bree is a simple, sweet name that gets me into places Oluwabimipe cannot. Bree good, Bimpe bad. You get? Bimpe mimicked something she saw on TV a while back, even though she couldn't remember who exactly made the hilarious remark (158).

Oroma, another Nigerian migrant character in the same novel mimics the Canadian style of expressing or showing unusual fondness for pets. So, she suddenly develops an unusual fondness for dogs. She does this to the point that getting two dogs becomes part of the items in her wish list. She frankly expresses these wishes to Owoicho who visits her apartment:

But you know what I would really, really like? Someday, when I'm qualified for mortgage, I want to have my own house in a nicer neighborhood. A three-bedroom duplex with lots of space, a garage, a garden for flowers and vegetables, and a packet fence, including two Bolognese dogs. Two dogs. Yes. One white and one black. I would name the

black one white and the white one black (240-41).

This description by Oroma simply displays the extent to which many African migrants mimic the choices and ventures of their host societies even if it contradicts what is obtainable in their native land. A character like Owoicho sees this as absolutely unimaginable when assessed through his normal African values. Thus, as Owoicho refers to that as “the craziest thing I have heard all week”, asking whether Oroma “has turned full Canadian”; Oroma's only response is “I dey tell you. One hundred percent Canadian” (241). Oroma's response to the issue of mimicking the Canadian way of life is as flimsy as that of Bimpe. In response to Ochanya's questions as to why she feels like Bimpe is not a good name in a new country, Bimpe answers:

I don't have an answer to that question Ochanya. But don't worry, shebi you'll start school here, and your dad too will be going out to look for work, abi? When that time comes, you'll know how important it is that Canadians can pronounce your names easily, or better still, that you have English names that can at least open the door for you until you walk in and they realize you're not white like them but Black (158).

This response suggests the rate of baseless imitation of the Western lifestyle to which most African migrants succumb in the postcolonial age, just in the pretext of maintaining a comfortable stay abroad.

Stressing on the details portrayed in most migration narratives, Kosmalga avers that:

Migration writing gives highly informative accounts of migration experience, exposes the stereotypical representations of migrants, gives piercing insights into migrants' host and home cultures, explores the issues of identity, nationality, borders and belonging, provides alternative about current social and cultural transformations. (331-32).

One may analyze the assertion above by stating that most writings on the subject of migration often search through the entire initial principles of the migrants before they engage in migration, their experiences with others during migration as well as how these reflect on the migrants' personalities after their encounter with their host locations. All of these are vividly illustrated in the novels being used in this research.

Cultural Assimilation and Migration Experiences

Most likely, migrants' thought patterns may change as they mingle with individuals in their host countries. Consequently, most of these migrants may relinquish some aspects of their native culture so as to assimilate those of their new abode. They may do this voluntarily or under pressure. Frantz Fanon explains that, “the inferiority complex created in black people who have accepted the culture of another country as their own will cause them to imitate the codes of their colonizers” (209). In this sense therefore, the concept of cultural assimilation is strongly linked to the subject of migration and is portrayed in the experiences of characters in migration writings. It is seen as “the process in which a minority group or culture comes to resemble a society's majority group or assimilates the values, behaviors, and beliefs of another group whether fully or partially. (*Wikipedia*, 1).

In Habila's *Travelers*, a character like Manu relinquishes his African culture of protecting children from looking at the nudity of an adult opposite sex. Having travelled to Berlin where the new culture attaches little or no value to people's nudity, Manu freely allows his daughter to look at the naked man on the sign post. The narrator reveals:

As they get off the train, they face a billboard with a completely naked man seated on a stool, leering into the camera, his crotch barely covered by his hands clasped over it. A few months ago, Manu would have stepped in front of his daughter to block her view, but now he simply turns his gaze

away. It is a new world, another culture. She'll get inured to it. (54)

In Adichie's *Americanah*, cultural assimilation is so rampant among the Nigerian characters who migrate and reside in America that the marriage institution is grossly affected by numerous cases of divorce in such country. Based on this, one of the characters who is an Igbo accountant in Massachusetts observes that, "Igbo women came to America and became wild. This was an unpleasant truth but one that had to be said. What else accounted for the high divorce rates among Nigerians in America and the low rates among Nigerians in Nigeria?" (139). In the same vein, Afenia's *Leave My Bones in Saskatoon* illustrates Bimpe's assimilation of the western cultural standards in marriage affairs. Therefore, in a conflict with her husband, Bimpe does not seek a polite or peaceful way of settling issues with Damiete as she should have done based on the African culture rather, she resorts to abusiveness and threatens to call the cops on him as it is done in the western culture. She abuses him thus: "Useless man. Liar. If you continue with these lies, I will call the cops on you again. You think this is Nigeria? We are in Canada, and I will deal with you. I will make sure you sleep on the street this night" (261).

On the aspect of parenting styles and how the cultural ways of child upbringing in the Western world are being assimilated by Nigerian parents abroad, another character in the novel who lives in United Kingdom remarks, 'I was just thinking that Nigerians here really forgive too much from their children because they have foreign accents. The rules are different' (280). The fear of not belonging to a particular group makes people experience a cultural crisis and adopt the culture around them and claim it as a part of their own culture. This phenomenon happens because people who grow up with two different cultures cannot determine which culture belong to them and end up adopting these two cultures as theirs (Yolanda Viviani and Robby Satria, 2).

This very issue reflects in the way Auntie Uju responds to her son's disrespectful remarks on her appearance in the novel. Thus, Dike boldly tells her; 'Mum, you look ridiculous' (189), and she sees nothing wrong with that even when such a remark from a child should have earned him a punishment in the Nigerian context. In addition, the same Auntie Uju further exhibits her adoption of the American culture as against her native Nigerian culture by opting that Ifemelu calls her by her first and not attach any special title to her name, she even instructs Ifemelu to avoid speaking Igbo language which is her native language to her son Dike: "Don't speak Igbo to him, two languages will confuse him" ((131).

Afenia in his own novel portrays another instance of cultural assimilation by Nigerians who live in Canada through the discussion between his characters; Owoicho and Bimpe. As Owoicho attempts to punish his daughter for trying to expose her nudity to a boy in Nigeria, Bimpe advises him:

In fact, the worst thing you can do here is touch a child or dare get physical with even your own pikin. You may land yourself in a big problem. You can't hit her or scream at her or something like that. Here, you talk to them. It is called negotiating. You have a conversation (218).

These remarks from Bimpe depicts the extent to which she abandons her original African culture which endorses discipline as an essential aspect of child upbringing, and how she prefers the foreign style just because she lives in Canada.

Unigwe's novel illustrates this state of cultural assimilation in the attitude of the three migrant characters; Ama, Efe, and Joyce in Antwerp, Belgium. At the strange disappearance and suspected death of their colleague, Sisi; they choose to mourn her in a very silent manner, even though they feel emotionally depressed by such incidence. The narrator reveals Efe's thoughts about how they should respond to Sisi's demise, comparing the

absence of sympathizers in their apartment in Antwerp to what would have happened if they are in Nigeria:

It is not appropriate that they should talk about food when they are supposed to be grieving. The sorrow is supposed to take away your appetite, take precedence over food. It would be unseemly for one of them to go to the kitchen and start cooking. Even Madam seems to understand this, so she did not bother to ask any of them to cook before she left. Back home in Nigeria, neighbors would have gathered to cry with us. Nobody will let you cry alone! Here, their grief has to be contained within the four walls of their flat. No matter how large it becomes for them, they must not let it crack the walls (54).

Hybridity

This is another concept which is connected to migration literature just as the ones in this paper. In explaining this concept, Dobie states that; “Interaction of cultures creates blended ones, mixture of the native and colonial, a process called hybridity or syncretism. Characterized by tensions and change, this process is dynamic, interactive and creative” (208). Characters depicted in the selected texts exhibit traits which are products of their interaction with other cultures.

Habila's protagonist who is also the narrator begins to change his relationship pattern and communication with his people back in Nigeria. This can be traced to his marriage with Gina, an American lady who does not even communicate with her own people while they both reside in Berlin. The narrator complains:

I haven't spoken to my mother in a while. When I first came to America, I used to call every Sunday, talking through five-dollar call card, the phone being passed from her to my father, to my sister

and my two brothers. The plan was for me to return after my Ph.D, but then I met Gina, and days turned into months, and the months into years, and then I stopped calling home. (35)

For the narrator, Gina his wife becomes a symbol of his interaction with a foreign culture, a reason he becomes a hybrid. Thus, his bond with his people back home and the fondness he had for maintaining a regular communication with them gradually fades. Also, Mark in Habila's work becomes a smoker just as a result of his contact with the lifestyles of the people he meets in Berlin. Although he has been the child of a clergyman throughout his childhood, the migration experience and encounters change his lifestyle to a wild personality, even to a transgender. Even though he is formerly known as Mary Chinomba and as a girl, the encounter with foreign environment and individuals makes him choose to become a male, with the name 'Mark'.

In Adichie's work, a character like Ifemelu experiences the tensions and changes produced by hybridity according to Dobie's definition. Ifemelu's interaction with people in America plunges her into applying relaxer on her hair and she eventually becomes a mixture of her original self and a strange one in appearance. First, Wambui explains to her the forms of tension which are linked to her hybrid state:

Relaxing your is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go out with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. That picture you sent me, you had your hair covered in the boat. You're always battling to make your hair do what it isn't meant to do. If you go natural and take good care of your hair, it won't fall off like it's doing now. I can help you cut it right now. No need to think about it too much (242).

Consequently, she begins to suffer emotional discontent and laments as she looks at her hybrid facial look: “I look so ugly, I am scared of myself” (242). Adichie further presents characters like the returnees in Lagos whom Ranyinudo who is another character in the novel complains of that: “Every day, you see them carrying bottles of water as if they will die of heat if they are not drinking water every minute” (25). These characters have become so hybridized by the American lifestyle of being allergic to heat that even when they return to Nigeria which is their native country, they still fail to come to terms with realities of the weather in their home country.

Furthermore, Joel Kuortti throws more light on the concept of hybridity, asserting that “as one of the most recurrent concepts in postcolonial literature, hybridity represents itself in the contact zones between the colonized and the colonizer and their mutual interdependence (“Hybridity in Postcolonial Literary Contexts”, 2023). Afenia's own novel shows a character like Jason, whose hybrid nature is a product of his change of environment or contact with the Canadian ways of life. And so, his taste for the native black pepper which his mother Bimpe uses to cook while they were in Nigeria changes. Having been asked whether he was like that in Nigeria, his parents disclose his real state of hybridity: “You know these Nigerian-Canadian children, they only want to eat cheese and burger... I can't cook with our local pepper anymore because of his allergies. In Nigeria, he ate everything and anything. These allergies started when we got here” (163).

Similar instances of hybridity are seen in Unigwe's narrative, a character like Madam becomes a smoker just because of her relocation to Antwerp. But she confesses that she never engaged in such lifestyle while in Nigeria. In her confession to Sisi who rejects her offer of a stick of cigarette, she remarks: “I didn't before I came here. But this is a different world. This place changes you. You learn to eat corn flakes with cold milk. Can you

imagine? They clear the head, cigarettes” (66). Having become a hybrid of two cultures, Madam who never tested cigarettes before migrating to Antwerp does not only smoke cigarettes, she now recommends it for people.

Conclusion

It is obvious that migration experience is usually accompanied by changes for which the original emotional, physical, economic and even cultural conditions of the individual apparently shift from what they were before ever the migration decision and relocation were made. These are issues highlighted by the migration novels in this work, such vicissitudes of migration are therefore exhibited in such concepts as mimicry, hybridity, unhomeliness and cultural assimilation, which in diverse ways characterize the postcolonial experiences of African migrants outside the African soil. A major point to note is that these experiences notify the African migrant of the prevailing nature of a masked form of colonialism even in a postcolonial age.

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