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Representing African Diasporic Subjectivities: Assimilation and Alienation in *Americanah* and *Open City* from an Afropolitan Perspective

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Abstract

Scholarly discussions of Africa and how it is portrayed in modern novels are changing from the conventional view that the continent is a place of proletarian struggle. Contemporary scholarly discussions regarding the portrayals of Africa and African identities in African diasporic stories have indicated that class and capital have emerged as crucial factors, complicating prevailing discussions surrounding race, identity, and culture. This paper contends that by utilizing transnational technologies and showcasing upper-middle-class experiences, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Teju Cole's Open City highlight intricate negotiations of identity, especially regarding adaptation to Western cultural contexts and the persistent yearning for a sense of belonging that remains unfulfilled. Moving away from the earlier concerns of African authors with national identity and political matters, as well as their defence of Africa in civilizational terms, both works challenge the celebratory narrative typically linked to Afropolitanism, emphasizing the emotional and socio-economic conflicts that shape global African identities. My paper seeks to explore this evolving terrain within African diasporic narratives, focusing on the concepts of assimilation and belonging through the perspective of Afropolitanism.

Keywords: *Assimilation, Alienation, Race, Afropolitanism, identity.*

1. Introduction

A concept of Afropolitanism, first coined by Taiye Selasi in her 2005 essay 'Bye-Bye', Barbar has become a fundamental principle to understand cultural, racial and identity-based issues within the rapidly appearing globalized world. This view has been raised in modern academic discourse concerning representation of Africa and African identities in the African diasporic narratives. "We are Afropolitans–not citizens, but Africans, of the world," says Taiye Selasi (528). According to Selasi, Afropolitans are cosmopolitan Africans who feel the strong emotional connection to their native countries though they live elsewhere (530). They know both the African languages and Western languages, and their lifestyle is multi-local and bi-cultural. Afropolitans are not limited by any national or ethnic stereotypes; they are fluid personalities formed through their education, their cross-border movement, and transcultural experiences.

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The philosophical approach of Afropolitanism is dualistic; it acknowledges the contradictions of diaspora, microaggressions and atomization of identities, as well as the triumph of cultural hybridity and movement. Since many Afropolitan stories focus on upper-middle-class protagonists who have access to the world, contemporary literature is criticizing the concept as elitist and class-privileged. This leaves one to ask whether Afropolitanism is the best-kept secret of structural inequalities. The Afropolitan writers focus on the notion of African subjectivities within the consumerist world, which distinguishes them against post-independence nationalistic writers. They shift their focus away from traditional political and social concerns to lifestyle, identities, personal agencies, and space. In this framework, where the protagonists are going back and forth between worlds, the themes of assimilation and belonging become the significant fields of the study.

This paper presents the argument that while using technologies that intend to reach transnational population groups and delivering accounts of upward mobility, the novels, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Open City* by Teju Cole, raise questions about implications of class, assimilation, and affective aspects of identity. Ifemelu's journey is characterized by a continuous reset of selfhood as she rejects American racial classifications, adjusts to new social norms, and eventually returns to Nigeria in pursuit of a true sense of belonging. Her blogs are a written version of the Afropolitan critique that reveals the racial absurdities of integration in the U.S., whereas Julius silently drifts on a cosmopolitan terrain of New York, having become an embodiment of Afropolitan melancholia. He shows how international migration can at once strengthen and loosen a sense of connection to the place, and how his intellectual detachment masks a greater degree of existential drift.

In this paper I will contend that the depiction of these two protagonists allows Adichie and Cole to expand the Afropolitan debate, transforming its focus on celebratory hybridization to the poignant actualities of alienation, nostalgia, and fissured belonging in the diaspora. Their narratives leave the readers with the choice to reconsider how class and culture do overlap in contemporary African writing, not only as ancillary knowledge, but also as indispensable elements of formations of transnational identity.

2. Assimilation and Alienation in *Americanah*

Adichie's book *Americanah* traces how Ifemelu undergoes identity mutation through five stages in her journey, namely: (1) her development into a Nigerian environment; (2) her first move to America and the corresponding exposure to uncharted cultural; (3) a stage of slow assimilation, still incomplete; (4) the inner migration to Nigerian sensibilities that finally induced her physical migration out of America; and (5) the alternative reabsorption into the

changed Nigeria through her transnational experiences (Feldner, 186). All the stages are accompanied by the acknowledgment of identity as fluid, characterized by the movement and evolution. Notably, the general trend is spiral instead of circular: she returns home to Nigeria, but she does not re-create her beginning. Even in those instances when she is assimilating, Ifemelu maintains a certain degree of discernible alienation with respect to the mainstream American culture– something that makes her story unique as compared to the linear migrant stories.

In her novel, Adichie provides us with a close picture of Ifemelu's hesitant assimilation into the American way of life and her future departure and change of order within the personal, cultural, and social landscapes. Adichie's pen demonstrates the transformation of how Ifemelu views the world: she becomes more comfortable with American norms, learns to speak and live as the Americans do and performs towards a kind of a bargain with the American way of life that is superior to hers. Upon arriving in a new space, she struggles to adjust in, she faces hostility even when accompanied by her aunt Uju. This sense of dislocation is aptly demonstrated by her early college experience, in which she feels stiff-tongued, being physically present but socially excluded, around peers who are proficient not only in subjects of study but also in academic social codes. Enthusiastic to know everything about America, she makes a full swing of cultural immersion, which subsequently is always laced with her Nigerian self and as much as she transforms herself, she cannot pass off as American and her cultural origins will always hold her at bay. This tension becomes more apparent when she is juxtaposed with Ginika, her friend, whose earlier migration allowed the process of her assimilation to be much less heavy. This contrast embodies the complex process of transnational identity, and the enduring effect of the original culture on diasporic life (Feldner, 187).

After her immigration to America, in pursuit of the better life, Ifemelu realizes that her black skin is perceived as inferior– something she had never thought of in Nigeria. This makes identity one of the major themes of the novel. First, she is to deal with racism as a black woman in America. Second, she is not an African American; therefore, she cannot empathize with the blacks as much. Her status as an immigrant informs her perception of being black in America. In this case, she articulates such sentiments on her blog Raceteenth, where she as a Non-American Black vents her ideas of how various black people perceive themselves. As explained in the novel, Blackness is not a monolithic experience, but a general term to which all the specific identities (such as African American, African diaspora, and Caribbean) can be attributed.

In the racially stratified American society, Ifemelu faces not only the discrimination of Blackness imposed upon her but also the discrimination of being a Non-American Black. Such a realization of Ifemelu has great implications since her culture as an outsider, as an African immigrant, makes some socio-racial dynamics unfamiliar or unattainable to her. Her blog essay, To My Fellow Non-American Blacks in America: You Are Black, Baby, turns into a platform of openly discussing the problematic nature of race in the American environment. Adichie brings to the fore the complications Ifemelu's cultural rootedness raises on her way to fit into the discrimination-ridden racial landscape of America, emphasizing the idea that Blackness in America is not a unified experience but a pluralized experience shaped by national, historic, and cultural contexts (Tunca and Ledent, 3).

Ifemelu also comes to understand that in America, there are stereotypes surrounding Africans living there. One such assumption is that Africans lack intelligence and are not expected to speak proper and fluent English. Her accent distinctly identifies her as an outsider. During her initial semester at college in Philadelphia, when she goes to sign up for classes, her interaction with Cristina Tomas represents her first direct experience with the subtle, yet striking racial and cultural dynamics present in America. Cristina Tomas addresses Ifemelu in a slow and patronizing manner, presuming that she cannot comprehend English due to her Nigerian accent. At the very beginning, Ifemelu is convinced that Cristina has somehow a problem with her speech. But soon she understands that it is her own foreignness that is being denigrated under Christina's caustic lens of racial prejudice. It is an emotionally poignant moment when Ifemelu feels like she is being looked down upon as being unintelligent and disregarded as an individual (Taylor, 73). Therefore, she starts rehearsing an American accent, an endeavour of adaptation and survival.

At one point during her university orientation, Ifemelu is targeted by her accent, and this is a sign pointing at how linguistic difference not only undermines perceived competence in the American context but also renders the speaker infantile (Taylor, 74). She develops an American accent, as an act of performative assimilation that signifies a purposeful effort to fit the standards of the national identity. But, again, this attempt quickly becomes untenable to Ifemelu; questioning the social worth pertaining to the ability to sound American, she poses the question: "Why was it a compliment, an achievement, to sound American?" (Adichie, 175). The fact that she eventually disdained the gained accent can be taken as a confirmation of a deliberate reinvention of her emotional rootedness to Nigeria, her birthplace. Her privilege to play with her tone and switch between her accents hinge at a more subtle kind of privilege as well. Assuming that there is some form of privilege in being able to assimilate, the flexibility to interchange between accents signifies a linguistic limberness that is not possible to most immigrants, particularly those whose accents are fixed. Thus, Adichie foregrounds

how language is viewed not only as a space where one is in a position of negotiating cultural identification, and also as a nonreferential measure of social capitalization in the diasporic life.

In *Americanah,* the issue of hair, especially the hair of Black women comes out as a rich source of culture and politics (Olorunsiwa, 140). Ifemelu describes it as "the ideal metaphor for race in America" (Adichie, 297), emphasizing how the fashion choices (especially hair styling) are filled with societal pressures and color-coded perceptions. She responds to normative standards of beauty by adopting them in the beginning and changing her hair style to fit the prevailing U.S. conventions just as she had done to her accent. However, her later denial of forced standards imposed by the other implies individual autonomy and racial self-respect. However, there are no consequences of such defiance without impunity. Even her natural hair turns out to be a social-political target, which attracts uninvited remarks concerning her ideological position and sexual orientation. By doing so, Adichie emphasizes that Black hair has been used not only as an aesthetic or fashionable trend but also has been the symbol of historical, racial, and gender contradictions, making it an important aspect of diasporic identity formulation and opposition.

As a nanny, working in Kimberly, Ifemelu experiences how Western people perceive Africa as a primitive place and has a lot of prejudiced attitudes with paternalistic overtones. She seems to show an alarming habit of depicting Africa as the land of misery, which is synonymous with war, famine, and helplessness. Her encounters with Kimberly and her White friends do not differ much in this regard. This perspective is particularly evident in a dinner party that Kimberly and her husband Don host, where guests glorify their charitable work and frame it as a travel destination where people want to express how good they are. It is in these experiences that Ifemelu learns how these stories commodify African suffering and reduce it into a means of Western ego and goodwill. With these scenes, Adichie criticizes superficial sympathy and implied sense of superiority that is often used to characterize Western humanitarianism, displaying how Africa is constantly presented not as a site of multifaceted reality, but as an abstract item of pity.

In Nigeria, Ifemelu never thought about herself in terms of privilege; her middle classes status was nil compared to the perception of this layer among people around her. When she finally immigrates to America, she is, however, surprisingly looked upon as privileged especially due to the perception of the Americans that she represents the poor, the starving and the Africans. Such misrecognition reveals the limited perceptions held by most Americans, to whom Africa is presented more by humanitarian mythmaking than by insight. Adichie deliberately constructs the character of Ifemelu in an intensely complex manner as she does not want or

allow any simplified accounts of being African. The self-discovery of the protagonist to be more aware of her Africannness in the U.S is not a revelation but an understanding of how the Western discourse has reduced and distorted the African experience. This is why, the failure of Ifemelu to identify with these preconceived notions makes an even more significant point as to how identity is formed –more by gaze than by experience of living.

Even though Ifemelu refuses to assimilate in outward societal expectations like her accent and hairstyle, a more strategic form of negotiation manifests itself upon closer connection with the American cultural norms. Another critical moment is when, after she arrives in America, she has emotional distress but refuses to believe, when Ginika makes the suggestion, that she might be depressed; this diagnosis is very foreign to her and also in the Nigerian setting where people dismiss mental health issues as temporary weaknesses.

This early rejection is the first symptom of the cultural alienation between her background and the understanding of psychological disorders of her host society. However, as time passes by, the accumulation of cultural familiarity by Ifemelu leads her to realize that she has a condition known as depression and that she requires the services of a medical professional. This transformation is a clear indication of a significant moment of her accommodation, not the passive kind, but the critical one, where the acceptance of some elements of American culture allows her to strengthen her self-understanding and emotional strength. With such development of the story, Adichie demonstrates that cultural hybridity may lead not only to the process of identity negotiation but also to self-healing.

Adichie introduces Ifemelu as a character who is placed between the two worlds, that of Nigeria and the United States. She has the ability to move between cultures and, more so, question the cultures as well since she is knowledgeable about the two cultures. She comes back to Nigeria with a new outlook after many years of her absence. This distance makes her realize some flaws of the daily customs that she could never see before (Feldner, 190).

3. Alienation and Belonging in Open City

Open City by Teju Cole explores the psyche of diasporic life through the depiction of Julius whose inward loneliness never goes away even though he is a successful medical professional. According to Cole, Julius' alienation is not deeply embedded in his cultural displacement but rather permeates throughout as a state of mind that will not be cured at the end of the story. As the journey of Ifemelu takes the form of identity recovery, Julius lives in a state of emotional and existential detachment. Collectively, the two novels provide a point to the various folds of diasporic subjectivity namely how displacement could fragment identity not only by the outer hostile circumstances but also the inner disquietude.

Open City is an extremely reflective account of Julius, a Nigerian doctor facing emotional alienation in New York City. Estrangement serves as a key theme throughout the novel, as it puts Julius in the position of an observer and a participant of the disarrayed immigrant life. His routine stroll in New York is an existential and spatial allegory of detachment; it is not just the mapping of a physical landscape, but also that of psychic space conditioned by loneliness. Unlike the community spirit of behaviour in Nigeria, where one's public presence makes him feel amongst fellowmen, the lonely outing of Julius on an American street demonstrates his exile. Cole shows the alienation of Julius not by some event, but by the slow contemplative rhythms of everyday life, which shows how the diasporic alienation lies in the smaller incidents than the big ones.

Even at the very beginning of the novel, it the loneliness of Julius which is depicted by his aimless wandering and his watching the migrating birds, symbolizing his emotional detachment and intense desire for psychic freedom. These walks become some sort of therapeutic ritual and help him to evade the strict routine of his medical residency: "they were a release from the tightly regulated mental environment of work… I forgot what life had been like before I started walking" (Cole, 4). It is with this descriptive narrative process that Cole tries to externalize the inner world of Julius, his yearnings, his mixed feeling about work and his unsaid thoughts about the 9/11 attacks. This introspective narrative voice unsettles the reductive portrayals of the African immigrants as being intellectually shallow. The sustained philosophical speculations of Julius confirm the multidimensionality of African subjectivity, and he can be regarded as a thinker in a diasporic literary realm. His meditations take place in the vibrant fusion of multilevel urban spaces of New York that acts as both muse and mirror to increase his distance from Nigeria. The loneliness of Julius, even in this crowded city, indicates such a psychological disjunction transcends the physical proximity of the people around him, embodying the idea a diasporic inability to find a sense of belonging to a racially ruptured world.

The fact that Julius takes four months to realize that his next-door neighbour is no more adds poignancy with which he thinks on his own coldness, brought out by the individualistic culture in which he lives in America. This restrained sorrow that Julius experiences as compared to the community-oriented grief he experienced when his father died in Nigeria where the entire community was grieving and sharing together the loss reveals just how much Julius has adapted, unintentionally, to the Western ideals of personal isolation and privacy. He confesses, "I had noticed neither her absence nor the change… It was not possible… to go knock on his door and embrace him… It would have been false intimacy," revealing how he feels discomfort with his emotional vulnerability, but also how he is unwilling to make an impulsive connection with humans. By such a subtle, but moving scene, Cole demonstrates

how the diasporic existence re-configures emotional responses, often replacing communal care with stoic aloofness. The story does not just explore grief as an individual experience, alone, but as a culturally specific experience, defined by space, memory, and by the subtle waning of intimacy.

Open City presents the biracial nature of Julius, of German and African heritage, as a lens through which the alienation of Julius is presented with subtle severity. According to Stenersen, "Julius feels neither fully Nigerian, nor fully German. Julius does not embrace America fully and he expresses an underlying critique of the American culture" (72). Not even fitting into any of the racial groups, Julius cannot live in harmony with either the Black or White American society; his skin colour being ambiguous speculates on his racial visibility setting him apart, and his roots creating interference with the seamless assimilation. This liminality is converted to a general feeling of alienation and, existential aimlessness, which is compounded by his emotional cutoff in terms of family and the surrounding environment. The continuing search of place and identity remains unresolved because of the double cultural polarity of Julius.

This dislocation is seen in the novel by his subdued interaction with the other Black Americans, where he is reluctant to tie with them because of a common race. In one of his walks, a Black cabdriver tries to make camaraderie with him because they belong to the same race; Julius is offended. Dwelling on Ellis Island as the port of entry of European immigrants, his comment "we blacks" came in a much harsher way leading to Julius' realization that the cabdriver wished to be recognized (Cole, 55). The scene represents one in which Julius demonstrates his unwillingness to join the movement of racial solidarity, another example of his internal conflict. It is not through such racial ambivalence that Cole addresses the issue of identity, but rather employs it in order to reveal the complex and sometimes tense process of negotiation faced by diasporic people whose bodies and history do not fit into distinct categorization.

Cole's *Open City* persuasively illustrates the connection between immigration and estrangement, emphasizing that dislocation can cause a severe disruption of your identity. Cole challenges any intellectual superiority of the West by introducing Julius as a complex character that he is introspective of what he passes through, negating the Western myth about simplicity of the Africans. Establishing fragmented memory and emotional detachment, the novel reveals the traumatic childhood experiences of Julius like his affair with Moji. The fact that he was not able to confront, or even remember those events highlights that trauma is not a culturally exclusive feeling, but rather it is a human experience that is universal no matter the position and race of an individual. Such non-commitment to the emotions, even in

situations that demand it, such as when Moji expresses her suffering, indicates the lasting psychological impacts of repression and denial. The impulsive sexual encounter Julius engaged in after being heartbroken, is one of the indications of his emotional dislocation. By describing him as a character who has been impacted by loss, alienation, and nostalgia, Cole denounces simplistic representations of African migrant people and instead proves how they can be emotionally and mentally complex and lifelike in the context of diasporic literature.

The difficulty endured by Julius to create any coherent sense of self is enhanced by his passive yet enduring criticism of the society that he inhabits. He cannot integrate into a modern way of life in America completely not only because of cultural dislocation but because of deeper philosophical alienation. Behind his estrangement is a speculative understanding of nostalgia, not at all an attachment to a lost past that can be recovered, but rather to a present that could provide attachment, significance or belonging. And this longing for belonging becomes only more complicated when it is coloured by Julius's broken history, which makes him look for home not in comforting memories, but in an always fleeting, always disappearing, and idealized present that never exists. Through this introspection, Cole has placed Julius in a state between alienation and aspiration where his social criticisms are not merely external criticisms but the inner upheaval and the longing for rootedness.

4. 'Afropolitanism' and Representation of Africans

Taiye Selasi coined the term 'Afropolitanism', which Achille Mbembe theorizes African identity as culturally hybrid and globally mobile. However, its reception demonstrates conflict of interests between realistic performance and elitist abstraction. Afropolitanism in both *Americanah* and *Open City* is no longer celebratory as it was often regarded but one that is on the map of identity negotiations, moral perplexity and narrative resistance (Hallemeier, 234).

In her novel, Adichie criticizes the Western view of Africa by using the blog of Ifemelu and her personal life story. Her story is against the "single narrative" of Africa – one that paints Africa solely in colours of poverty, war and hopelessness. It reduces the continuum of the continental complexity and diversity into caricatures. That Ifemelu comes to the understanding of her Blackness in America demonstrates the fact that race is a social construction rather than a biological essence. The pressure of belonging to the American landscape is expressed through her accent, hair and identity struggle. Although Ifemelu moves in the world of the elite, her observation on liberal racism and performative allyship violates the optimism of Afropolitans. The decentralization of global economic history as enacted in the novel can be construed as subverting the expectations that the African novel is

always already politically orientated. Adichie in her novel defies the expectations that African literature should otherwise do, by treating the political economy as one of the negligible plot points in the romance between Ifemelu and Obinze. Like many other Afropolitan narratives, *Americanah* could be critiqued or celebrated as eschewing the embattled position of the third-world culture and society and preferring the embattled love-lives of highly educated Nigerians.

Julius, in Cole's novel, is a flaneur whose inward meanderings serve to explore a disunified, at times even elusive, attitude to personal and communal identity and history. The fact that Julius does not identify himself with a single identity is an element of Afropolitan fluidity as well as a worrying sign of moral disengagement. The fact that he does not mention personal trauma and complicity (most notably in the novel's controversial revelation) also questions the trust and moral expectations of the reader. Africa is pictured as a remembrance of an old time, as a ghostly remembrance: a diasporic dislocation instead of cultural anchoring. Cole therefore seeks to criticize the limits of cosmopolitan empathy in his novel arguing that Afropolitanism conceals more profound ethical vacuums.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on how *Americanah* by Adichie and *Open City* by Cole describe the intertwined themes of identity and estrangement, raising to the forefront the contradictions and misunderstandings that the diasporic Africans frequently need to confront. In *Americanah*, this issue of migration that undermines Ifemelu's ability to connect to the Nigerian origins is evident through her navigating the problems of cultural assimilation and racial identification. The societal push to assimilate–through language and aesthetics and norms of behaviour–only increases her identity crisis. Her choice to adopt an American accent and then to reject it is used as a metaphor on the tension between belonging and authenticity. She is able to eventually reach back to her home in Nigeria in a self-proclaimed reclamation, implying a solution not through cultural mutuality but through insistence.

Open City, on the other hand, provides a much more internal examination of alienation in Julius, who is psychologically and emotionally isolated in his social mobility. His aloofness is reflected in his loneliness of walks throughout New York, and the lack of human connection only makes him more alienated. The hybridity of having an identity of a Nigerian and of Germans also complicates his positionality as he is somehow in a suspended space of fragmented affiliations. In contrast to Ifemelu, the story that Julius tells does not end with its end; his foreignness has not been alleviated in any way and his identity quest was a quiet and unresolved one.

These novels together resist the reductionist accounts of African migration, pointing to not only an external culture-clash but also an internal confrontation with past, identity, and belonging. In both the novels, the issue of Afropolitanism interrogates its celebratory terrain, engaging in the issues of race, class, migration, belonging, and memory that intersect with each other. Adichie presents an opposite view of Afropolitan optimism and shifts her focus to the lived reality and social critique. Cole, on the contrary, provokes uneasiness and thoughtful moral answers, which might be seen as a philosophical reflection of displacement and detachment. Both *Americanah* and *Open City* invite the reader to take a fresh look at how Africa is being presented to the world not by way of images of its polished and idealized landscape, but as a place that reflects the complicated realities of life and migration process, as well as issues of identity on multiple levels.

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