

Original Research Paper

Globalization and Black Identity: Interrogating Local & Translocal Imagination in the New Transatlantic African Writings Kehinde and Americanah

Syed Sumaira Gilani¹

¹ Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia. New Delhi, India.

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*Corresponding Author:

Syed Sumaira Gilani

Email:

syedsumaira70@gmail.com

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Abstract: Geography plays a significant role in shaping the identity of an individual, especially, African ‘black’ identity. In the globalized era, black identity does not imply a stable signifier of the African race but is substantially contingent. The global interconnectedness has rendered the communication between different community’s complex and challenging. The diasporic encounters of Emecheta and Adichie draw a separate yet linked legacies of their local/translocal black experiences from which they elicit their understanding of the two global realms, Global North and Global South. The research article critically analyzes the major concerns of race and black identity in the select novels, Kehinde and Americanah. The argument tries to bring to the forefront two conflicting cultural and political forces, African and American/European, simultaneously transcending and celebrating the local and the translocal. As a consequence, the subjective identities of the character’s act as variables that perceive the racial difference on the one hand, and on the other, the difference helps contribute in their identity formation in hybrid spaces like America and Britain.

Keywords: Black Identity, Globalization, Local, Translocal, Transnational Movements.



1. Introduction

In their engagement with multifarious experiences of diasporic identities, African writers attempt to negotiate with plural identity configurations as a result of otherness, dislocation, displacement, and exile. The transnational movements have resulted in the decentralization of the realities of African encounters with the West. This has given a formal shape to the global interconnectedness through a single network. However, there lies an important task to explain the global “interconnection” that tends to exist among distinctly benefitted nations especially the Global South, which also includes Africa. It has become even more crucial on the part of the writers and the academic researchers from the Global South to lay down the techniques of the phenomenon of globalization operation. Global processes of immigration and other transnational movements shape black migrants and their subjective identities.

Placed in the new cultural and political orientation, black identity, at various institutions of transnational dynamism, experience cultural regulations. In the era of globalization, African nation-states are posed with a challenge of meeting the expectations of the Global West. Also, globalization as a concept invites such nations to either fit in by constructing a valid place within the Globalization paradigm or help distinguish Africa’s position in such a problematic boundary. African studies with respect to its culture, people, and society, no doubt, includes the study of its history, culture, politics, demography, languages, capital economy, and religion.

2. Literature Review

The specialists in such areas, contends Cooper, “should be particularly sensitive to the time-depth of cross-territorial processes, for the very notion of ‘Africa’ has itself been shaped for centuries by linkages within the continent and across oceans and deserts- by the Atlantic slave trade, ..., by cultural and economic connections across the Indian ocean” [1].

In his book, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, James Ferguson registers the demographical changes that the immigrants go through along with the challenges the city offers to the immigrants [2]. What the city has locked up inside it is something that is ‘partial’ and ‘fleeting’, hence, does not ensure constructing any definite meaning of existence. Such fluctuating nature of the urban lifestyle, with all its definitions of misinterpretations, doing things offhand becomes a way of life. Cosmopolitans, in an urban demographical situation, do not fail to find themselves engaged with the conflict that arises between the urban and the rural, the discussion that has an urgency in the contemporary global world. However, in their fight with the contrasting understandings of the binaries and in their dealings with “counter-linearities and uncertainties of the present”, the cosmopolitans show more interest in the disorganized urban space. Their approach highlights the cultivation of urban settings to fit within the city, and therefore, rebut themselves to be seen in the urban/rural paradigm. Defining human existence in a similar pattern builds on the fact that meanings are constructed as definite and categorical. But, one would not settle down with such limited vision of life. Modern globalized world, though, suggests a form of interconnection, and does not envision to make human self an independent human entity that exists on pure and totalizing definitions. Rather, the existential meaning and identity moves like a pendulum, moving to and fro between various paradigms of the space. Human entities participating within this space are fluid and open. They all become a free floating signifiers, the performers that try to harmonize in the new surroundings with straightforward and unambiguous social constrictions. Even after cultivating new identities, these performers still long for their return to the roots. With black immigrants, their subjective identities are defined in accordance with their Blackness, Africanness, and Nigerianness when placed parallel to their connections with the new hybrid reality of the west. They become many, all at once. They become identified with the shifting urban realities. The interesting characteristic that has substantiated the shift in the identification of the Black subjectivity, is the attention of the anthropologists around the globe concerning black race. Ceased to exist as observable substance for scientific or analytic purposes, black immigrants have come to a point where their existence has developed a capacity to interpret the globalized world and how it is structured. No doubt, Africa, like other countries of the globe, finds a critical ‘place’ within the concept of ‘the global’. This ‘place’ is both the location in space as well as the hierarchical standing in the social structure of the world [3]. Ferguson further stresses upon the discussions on the metaphor of ‘flow’ in a space that finds Africa on equal terms with the culture and economic realities around the globe. Such suggestions ensure the tight linkages between the Global South and the Global North. As a matter of fact, Africa turns out to be that part of the total geographical sphere which allows the

researchers see how the ‘flow’ does not certify the legitimate cooperation between these contiguous spaces. In the light of the phrases globe-hopping and globe-covering as identified by Ferguson in his book *Global Shadows*, he argues that the capital flows in an open space not “covering” but “hopping”. This results in an intriguing examination of belongingness to the global space where the “object of alterity” refuses to be recognized as the “other”. Ferguson takes this argument to a further level in his essay titled “Decomposing Modernity” by enunciating the possibilities of pluralistic and multiple Modernities [4]. This pluralistic attribute adds supplementary obscurities and complications in the cultural, social, economic and political accord that the blacks have developed in their kinship with the West.

The relationship between the Global South, here Africa, and the Global North as precisely defined geopolitical and cultural spaces have developed differently in the African literary texts. The discourses on the global concepts of transnationalism, transculturalism and people migrating overseas in search of a better life find considerable amount of attention questioning the very logic of the binary, ‘indigeneity’ and ‘globalization’[5]. In the special volume of a scholastic journal *African Literature Today*, titled *New Directions in African Literature: A Review*, a plentiful articles provide a strong opinion on the position of African literature at the end of the 20th century. The literature provides a possible direction by examining the new emerging artists from the continent, especially the growth of Black women authors. The visible impact of globalization cannot be overshadowed by overemphasizing the social and political concerns of African literature. Instead, equal treatment has been given to such contributors who have raised a significant concerns of modernization, globalization and the diasporic perspective and its consequences on the coming generation of writers. The determination to seek such objectives can be summed up by mentioning some significant research articles that include in Ernest N. Emenyonu’s *New Directions in African Literature: a review* are Charles Nnolim’s “African Literature in 21st Century: Challenges for Writers and Critics”; Thomas Hale’s “Bursting at the Seams: New Dimensions of African Literature in the 21st Century”; Richard Priebe’s “Transcultural Identity in African Narrative of Childhood”; Iniobong I. Uko’s “Transcending the Margins: New Trends in Female Writings in Africa”; Nana Wilson Tagoe’s “Re-thinking Nation and Narrative in a Global Era: Recent African Writing.” These “new directions” call for the building up of the transcultural identities manifested in cultural and symbolic orchestrations doing its rounds in the 21st century. Also, what position the African traditional women have acquired is best illustrated in Uko’s article which challenges the traditional assumptions and stereotypes about Black African women’s body and their modern education. The article goes as far to pronounce the reticulate connectivity between the individual, social, and political issues accommodating Black women writers and their “new directions” as “repositioning the [marginalized] African woman” [6]. Anthropological theories of globalization and the recurrent themes accentuated in African literary engravings explore evident communicational exchange through global experiences. These discussions provide vantage position to African female writers in diaspora to explicitly narrate their stories of postcolonial multiplicity in black identities. Achille Mbembe seeks departure from the western form of post colonialism as his belief system works on the preposition that focus should be on the contemporary material social realities. The civil unrest and neocolonization in the garb of modernization, resulted in the large scale movement of African men and women to the urban/city landscapes of the West in search of jobs and better education and to accomplish their dreams in the land of opportunity. Global South has a need to rethink in terms of power and capital because the lack of power and capital has led to the deliberate utilization of accultured and hybrid identities of Black people overseas. However, subaltern studies did allow a different vision to look at the archives of history but what differentiates subaltern studies with transnational outlook on the archival arrangements is the coloured cosmopolitanism, linguistic diversity, proliferating and traversing geographies, and the transculturally unifying agents of consciousness.

3. Methodology

The objective of this article is to critically analyze the major concerns of race and black identity in the select novels, Kehinde and Americanah. The focus is to bring to the forefront two conflicting cultural forces, African and American/European, simultaneously, transcending and celebrating the local and the translocal. The present research article, eventually, ventures into highlighting the idea about how African immigrants seek to affirm, manipulate, and define their black identity by reclaiming a space for self in a culture seen imperceptible. Cross-cultural adaptation, therefore, becomes the major thematic interest in the select novels. It also gives rise to the question of belongingness, ultimately,

leading to the longing for independence, and hence, transcending the identities of Black traditional Igbo life.

4. Finding and Discussion

African women writers of the second and the third generation, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie respectively, have successfully constituted themselves as the products of the transcultural human mobility. In the recent developments of globalization, black translocal individual, with pluralistic social experiences, has become part of the globe, and has connected with cross-cultural interactions in various ways possible. The two women authors from Nigeria, although come from different generations with different set of traditional and modern belief systems, quite fastidiously bring the raw matter from the local/translocal imagination. Standing at the edge of the two realms, they accrue their observations by writing from inside as well as outside of the African nation-state, Nigeria. Host countries, America and the United Kingdom, become hybrid spaces for the African immigrants where their bodies get constituted. The writers identify these sites and locate the places where the black identities of their characters are lost and regained, though with a different set of meanings. The transnational movements across the globe discussed in the academic scholarship reveals the slippery nature of the word 'west'. West, as a concept, is loaded with the historical images associated with it. The idea of west mainly conceived in relation to the historical conception of the east, the historical linkage between the west and the east links the national with the global, thus, blurring the boundaries between the two. The global linkage has not just taken away the long tradition of the west enjoying the position of being the yardstick of 'other' literatures but has also been guaranteed with ambiguity. Thus, the portrayal of black female characters, for instance, in their transatlantic mobility shown in 'other' literatures as "girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form the ponytails" [7] not only challenge the mainstream idea of a heroine, it also establishes the formation of an undeniably unforgettable character portrayals in Black Literature [8].

A 21st century novel, *Americanah*, first published in 2013, describes the protagonist Ifemelu's dream of pursuing her studies in America where she finally lands after she travels from Nigeria, and then travels back carrying with her the experiences of both the spaces. During her journey, what interests the readers is her acute observation of the western white society that persists in racial discrimination against native/non-native blacks, the white indifference towards the issue of race and the blacks failed attempt at emulating western standards of beauty. Buchi Emecheta's 1994 novel, *Kehinde*, comments on the individual identity of a Black Nigerian woman, the protagonist of the story, Kehinde, who, with her husband Albert and two kids, stays in London for almost eighteen years. Due to his sister's persuasive nature, Albert suddenly decides to go back to his family in Nigeria leaving behind his wife who is advised to sell the London house before coming back to Nigeria. The traumatizing journey to Nigeria, Kehinde's stay with her traditional family for a brief period of time, infects Kehinde with resentful attitude towards her traditional Nigerian family. Also, the infidelity of Albert creates a sense of longing in her to move to London. The two characters' lives, Ifemelu and Kehinde, move to and fro like a pendulum in search of an individuality, sometimes forced to shun their old traditional baggage, while at times ready to negotiate between cultures of different spaces by moving beyond the cultural dichotomy.

In their attempt to translocate themselves to western geographical spaces, Emecheta and Adichie, operate in a writing culture by placing themselves as outsiders to the native traditional cultural spaces. Thus, they provide an objective perspective on the native cultural and social panorama. At the same time, they generate an insider/outsider dichotomy within the western globalized cultural settings. This is corroborated by Adichie when she reflects in her essay "The Writer as Two Selves" that the writer from the Third World becomes the one representing the periphery of the centre. Adichie terms such writers as the "inhabitants of the periphery", a phenomenon that points to the action of "being outside of the centre", both metaphysically and psychologically [9]. As has already been mentioned, the two novels are based in Nigeria, America, and in the United Kingdom. These novels, therefore, can be referred to as the "New Transatlantic African Writings". The novels materialize the Nigerian peculiar cultural tradition on the global standing with subtlety and preciseness. The presence of the diasporic consciousness cannot be undervalued in the analysis of the select works, although, there surely appears a two-decade time difference between the novels from the date of publication. Like authors, the characters, Kehinde and Ifemelu, too face the situation of being at two spaces at the same time and greatly influenced by the multifaceted experiences of both the cultures, that is, maintaining the centre

while belonging to the periphery. The novels comment on the cultural dynamics of the hybrid space. These challenge the supremacy of the host culture and draw a social circumference that exposes the pull of the tradition in the face of the force exerted by the west in the immigrants' way of life.

In an interview with Elena Rodriguez Murphy, Adichie asserts that the novel *Americanah* is less about going home to Nigeria and more about leaving home for America. The novel is "about leaving home", "about what home means" [10]. "Leaving home" further reveals the capacity of the displaced being or the "translated being", to "create home in [your] mind". As a consequence, in the process of homecoming, the "translated being" finds the home in its complete contrast with the imagined home. Comparatively, Emecheta's novel, *Kehinde*, too establishes the similar pattern of homecoming. The difference between the two lies in its treatment of the female character, *Kehinde*, whose homecoming translates into her emancipation as a new Nigerian educated woman in England. By looking into the character of an independent *Kehinde* and her ideas about home, she looks confused when she retorts: "My dreams about home are confused. I haven't a clear vision what I'm supposed to be looking for there" [11]. The characters in the shape of Ifemelu and *Kehinde* constitute dynamic positions in a hybrid space. This is illustrated in novels with a clear sense of the character's experiences producing varied diasporic images Brancato terms as "afrosporic" positions [12]. The characters are seen constructing their individual identities influenced by the local and translocal paradigms as a result of the transnational mobility.

The blackness or africanness in the definition of African immigrant identity, Nigerian in the present context, is constituted as soon as the black immigrants arrive at the western borders where they are perceived racially different. The black immigrants become conscious of their racially defined skin color on the western social scenes, interestingly, adding a racial dimension to their identity. Also, the cultural encounter in a hybrid space symbolizes an identity shift among black immigrants and the transformation in their collective black identity. This shifting nature of the individual and collective identity is what forms the core theme of the black literature proliferated in the globalized era. The racial difference in relation to the western white society appears preeminent to identity formation. *Americanah* emphasizes similar concern with respect to the constitution of black identity through the western standard of identity politics. Adichie stresses on the black bodies as seen naturally deformed and defined from the gauge of blackness. In America, Ifemelu identifies herself as an individual immigrant from Nigeria whose status is defined by her blackness. In Nigeria, Ifemelu never thought of herself as black or different from other races. But, the moment she lands herself in America; her skin color becomes suddenly important. Her skin color defines her position in a society which is culturally and political polarized. In an interview, a Nigerian-born British novelist Buchi Emecheta believes that Nigerian people thought about England as "a promised land". They remain oblivious to the actual conditions black immigrants face in a new social, cultural and political landscape. Nigerian blacks are "brainwashed" "into thinking that [England] is more or less like the United Kingdom of God" [13]. Globalization, as a project, is not a recent phenomenon that has entered into the technological scenario of the 21st century. It existed way before the present technological developments. The racial and cultural demarcations between the east and the west existed during the time of colonization as well. The colonization provided a potential national and transnational black movements across the borders. The questions that follow are how did this movement help Nigerian black immigrants construct their individual and collective identities? What role their diasporic existence plays in nurturing their black identities based on their experiences in a societal shift brimming with racial ideologies?

Contrary to the above observations, what the readers find in *Kehinde* is a Nigerian Black woman protagonist, *Kehinde*, who is independent and educated with a pretty good job in a bank where she earns more than her husband. She owns a house in London, quite unusual for any Black woman in the Nigerian social context. *Kehinde's* distinguished self in a hybrid space makes her stand out in the traditional society of Nigeria. *Kehinde*, no doubt, has earned her individual identity as a distinctive woman who has a say in almost all the matters. The transformation in her status, however, does not make her reject the Black Nigerian roots. Rather, her diasporic experiences give her the power to negotiate with the European cultural dynamics. She no longer depends on male patriarchy for financial support, a sign of western feminist ideal that advocates individual identity. At the same time, her traditional gestures preserve her Africanness. The western host culture gives her the opportunity to find coherence within herself, the coherence she never had experienced in Nigeria. What separates her translocal experience from that of her husband is his thirst for power that only the Nigerian social and cultural settings would provide him. The space like England provides security and opportunity for

black women, as seen in case of Kehinde. Interestingly, for Albert, the male superiority under patriarchal control in Nigeria supersedes the cultural and economic equality in a space like England. Thus, his movement away from England comes with the perception that Nigerian men become 'nothing' in the global white society, whereas, Nigerian Black women become 'something' by gaining independence and self-recognition.

One of the significant diasporic images that can be drawn from the two novels is, therefore, the image of place where new identities get constituted and previously defined identities either get replaced/modified or questioned. Ifemelu, the main protagonist in *Americanah* and Albert in *Kehinde* are the two characters who are clear examples of how the place defines the identity of a Black migrant differently. Ifemelu sees the western influence in the manner that completely challenges the way she viewed the west previously, Albert, on the other hand, no matter how enticing the modernized world appears to him, he ends up carving an individual out of him in a manner more committed to the traditional values. Each instance perceives the idea of west differently, that is, the west can treat the black immigrant differently. In case of Ifemelu, her arrival at America puts her in an awkward position. For the first time, she sees herself as a 'black' woman she never had recognized herself with when she was in Nigeria. Her blog titled "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America You Are Black, Baby" Ifemelu writes:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country [14].

This becomes one part of the story as far as their individual black identities are concerned. But, Adichie also doesn't shy away from delivering on the topic that directly puts her characters into the situation where they are forced to reject their Nigerian identity in favor of being accepted in a society like America rich with standard notions of feminine identity. Adichie enunciates the "concept of alienation" as subtle "with the full complement of satire and caricature" [10]. The cosmopolitan space of the salon that Ifemelu visits and where she meets Black women from different Black ethnicities working together, constantly reminds her not only of being 'different' but 'black' as well. Hence, they always find themselves being defined in relation to the standards of western culture. Inside the black cosmopolitan space of the salon, hair is frequently invoked as a metaphor of feminine identity. The metaphor comments on the African Black women's adaptation to the western white standards of corporate policies as well as the defiance of these American cultural norms. The situations, thus, translate black immigrants into "transatlantic beings" who are sufficiently enchanted with the culture and mannerism of American social structure. While at the same time, the black immigrants with different ethnicities share the common motivation to retain their African ethos.

The novel *Kehinde* goes as far to show, how under the immense pressure of globalization, the impact of which leads to a change in the whole set of ideas based on Nigerian diversities, the Nigerians refuse to swerve from the pleasures of pure ethnic cultural approach. For instance, Albert stresses upon giving up on his well settled life in London and plans to go back to Nigeria. Though, it costs him the male heir of the family. The character has been created in such a manner that comments on the role of Global North having least affected the primordial belief system of Nigerians long instilled in their psyche. The promise of the land, although, fulfilled all their dreams in London for eighteen long years, but could not interfere with the uncompromised Nigerian cultural and patriarchal ideology of Albert. The western global society has an inconsequential impact on Albert's undefiled ways of looking at the Nigerian family structure. Albert, as a "transnational being", is not completely translated by the western European culture, rather is aware of his Nigerian roots that occasionally keep challenging the hosts' cultural dynamics. Emecheta writes:

...behind the veneer of westernization, the traditional Igbo man was alive and strong, awaiting an opportunity to reclaim his birthright [11].

However, Kehinde's subordinate position in her Nigerian family reduces her to an unwanted appendage dependent on Albert. Under the patriarchal structure of Nigeria, her status contrasts with that of her acquired position in England. The concessions she had been making and a few of them she was forced to make just to put things together with her husband and her children did no more than make her feel like "Albert [and children] slipping through her fingers, like melting ice" [11]. As soon as she finds them well adapted to the family structure, her determination to leave for England becomes stronger. Her determination is informed by her role reversal, her position as the penniless senior wife in the family household. As soon as she reaches England, things are not the same for her.

She faces difficulties in securing a job for herself and works in a hotel. It is from here in the story Emecheta lays bare the historical racial discrimination of blacks in western societies. Through the historical black image of Hottentot Venus, Emecheta explores racism in England. The fantasy surrounding Sara Baartman's black body defines Sheikh's curiosity of Kehinde's black body. Her identity as a black female Nigerian is defined by her black race and the historical symbols associated with her feminine body. For Kehinde, the journey from being 'somebody' in England to a penniless senior wife in a polygamous Nigerian setting provides her the impetus to "adopt herself to the type of European female pattern" [15]. As a matter of fact, Kehinde's moving back to England, no doubt, makes her push away the boundaries of marginality that her Nigerian tradition offers. It also lands her into the marginality of othernesses in a racially hierarchical society of England. Hence, Kehinde "found herself once more relegated to the margins" [11]. However, the primary source of her marginality that Kehinde identifies with is the male superior gaze that inferiorizes and intimidates her individuality. Instead of being marginally intimidated, Kehinde negotiates with her past (twin Taiwo) and her present (her son's claim over property) relations to assert her power and identity as an independent woman living on her own terms in England. Rejecting her son's claim on her house and her relationship with the black tenant living in the house further authorizes the recognition of her newfound power and identity. In the narratives of the phenomenon of globalization, space appears a keyword where power as a signifier ceases to work in dualities of male and female/superior and inferior. The phenomenon provides a potentially new space where different cultural encounters help assert multiple identities. Therefore, Kehinde's migration to London signifies her participation into human continuity, transformation, adaptation into multiple forms. Together with the concept of globalization, the category of migration forces one to delve into new concepts like belonging, otherness, subordinate, space, power, and marginality within the periphery.

5. Conclusion

The transatlantic journey that the characters take in both the novels, although, speak different stories for different people, but, they make sure that there is a constant movement between several cultural encounters resulting in translation into multiple realities/identities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie illuminates this idea of multiple realities in "The Danger of a Single Story" in which she emphasizes the danger that the single story implies. Single story has the capacity to be the only story and hence, incomplete. Therefore, there is no single story, rather, many stories exist and co-exist. The novels, too, do not signify the only stories but comment on the fact that many stories carry many truths that breathe concurrently and give holistic meaning to the society. Adichie's emphasis on the presence of many-stories when Ifemelu writes for the "Zipped-up Negroes" and reads as follows:

This is for the Zipped-up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space.

The above passage communicates the possibility of many more stories, the stories with different beginnings and an end. Each story has the potential to register the cultural as well as the linguistic differences (Adichie refers it as belonging to the 'Engli-Igbo' generation). Emecheta and Adichie, unconventionally yet subtly refer to these differences throughout the texts references to racism and cultural encounters. These differences further note the existence of western culture and language as not standards or privileged colonial inheritance, rather, the difference signifies their inevitable presence in the transnational/transcultural notions of the global space.

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