

Culture, Resistance, and Memory:

Afrocentric Revisions in Americanah and On Black Sisters Street

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ABSTRACT

The research article highlights the theoretical framework of Afrocentricity in *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters Street*. It revises the Afrocentric culture, resistance, and memory of Ifemelu and Sisi by reclaiming their migration in the Western structure. The study further explores the components of diaspora and migration by addressing the systematic exploitation faced by the protagonists in the novels. It interrogates Eurocentric structures by validating African cultural consciousness and resistance to recentering their identity. Embracing their African selfhood becomes the greatest challenge for Ifemelu and Sisi; their rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards paves way for the reclamation of African identity and cultural renewal. Both novels, in this note, contribute highly to the understanding of embedded racism and identity politics. The narratives shift between the cross-cultural ideologies to decode the significance of

Afrocentricity and resistance. The study concludes by rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards and validating the strength of African women in reclaiming their lives through African Selfhood.

Keywords: Afrocentricity, Culture, Memory, Identity, Diaspora, Migration, Resistance.

The postcolonial African – American literary stream faced a systematic displacement of longing for cultural identity and African selfhood. Migration and postcolonialism frequently exposed the unequal and complex power structure operating in self-discovery, especially for the African-American women. In this context, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie and *On Black Sisters' Street* by Chika Unigwe are analysed. The novels explore significant discourses, such as African women migrating to Western society to make a living, but ending up fighting diaspora, displacement, memory, race, and identity. The protagonists vehemently experience a physical and psychological journey as they enter this cultural transformation. Ifemelu in *Americanah* travels to the United States merely to encounter American racial discrimination, and Sisi, in *On Black Sister Street*, migrates to Europe to become economically stable, but is straddled between exploitation and Marginalization. As Stuart Hall says, "identities are the names we give to different ways in which we are positioned by, and the position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 225).

Afrocentricity is an important framework used for understanding the perspectives of African diasporic identity and their cultural values. Afrocentricity provides a theoretical orientation of African diasporic literature and challenges the Eurocentric perspectives of Western society. The concept was introduced by Molefi Kete Asante in 1980. This theory works as a framework to validate the African agency, and it counters the Eurocentric dominance by questioning its existence. The core principles of the theory include reclamation of history, location and orientation, victims and positioning of African people. In academia, the theory is contextualised and expanded into research centers to render community services

and to address the current reality of the diaspora. It also works as a theme of cultural Revival. It challenges cultural imperialism and promotes a balanced view of world history through the Afrocentric narrative, "African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behaviour" (Asante 2-3). The theory also illuminates the analysis of narratives of victimhood and stories of resistance and self-definition.

According to Asante, Afrocentricity emerges as a response to Eurocentric interpretations of African history, culture, identity, and the politics of marginalization. Their historical consciousness and cultural identity became the centre of Afrocentricity. The application of this theory formulates the idea of multilayered oppression, racial prejudice, gender expectations, and vulnerability of African culture in the select novels. The struggles of Ifemelu and Sisi operate together against a certain form of discrimination. Ifemelu exposes the social construction of race and cultural significance that exists in Western society. She initially doesn't understand the importance of trying to fit into the racialised society. Later, she observes, "the only reason you say race was not an issue is that you did not have to think about it" (Adichie 359). On the other hand, Sisi reveals Technology dimensions of the diaspora by getting trapped in a system that commodifies African women and objectifies their bodies as subjects. Unigwe carefully narrates the economic dimensions of the diaspora by portraying migration not just as an opportunity but as a space where African women are exploited, and survival becomes challenging.

Homi K. Bhabha describes this condition as the 'third space', where new cultural meanings emerge through interaction between different traditions (Bhabha 37). Both novels encounter the systematic oppression and exploitation faced by the African American women in Western society. Adichie mentions, "When you are black in America, and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters" (Adichie 277). This shows the constant fight between reclaiming personal identity and racial discrimination in the

Western context. Similarly, Sisi's migration is never an escape from reality for African women. She desperately wants to survive the systematic exploitation in the transnational spaces. Still, she is forced into prostitution rather than liberation "She knew that she could not withstand another year in Lagos. Not like this. I must escape" (Unigwe 30).

Both protagonists are cut off from their African roots and struggle to represent the exploitation of the diaspora. Unigwe criticises the existing Global systems that is exploiting migrant labour, which don't guarantee empowerment with hope or ambition. The migrant reality faced by the African American women demonstrates the individual relationship to their native land and the cultural displacement of trying to fit into Western society. Memory plays a significant role in re-shaping African American racial identity and cultural connection. Ifemelu is made to negotiate her cultural identity and selfhood in the United States as the interaction between different traditions as mentioned by Homi Bhabha.

Eurocentric standards are set so high that it causes physical, mental, and psychological distress to being naturally black. African American women are forced to follow these unnatural beauty standards to fit into society. Keeping their African selfhood in its natural texture functions as an important symbol to reassert black women's authenticity and African heritage. Adichie notes that she rested her head against his and felt, for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size (Adichie 342). Ifemelu at one point decides to embrace Eurocentric standards by changing her lifestyle, food habits, dress sense, and hairstyle. Sisi, on the other hand, tries to assert African identity and cultural consciousness by escaping prostitution and reclaiming her journey towards self-definition. She centers African values by resisting the dehumanizing effect of white dominance. Unigwe writes: "She thought of home. Of her mother's cooking,

the smell of egusi soup that clung to the curtains. Of the bougainvillea that draped itself over the gate” (Unigwe 45).

For Ifemelu, African cultural memories and identity become a crucial tool to recollect her childhood and her memories with her lover Obinze. “The clarity of that memory, the sudden stab of longing it brought, left her unsteady” (Adichie 550). Her memory serves as a powerful tool to navigate the alienation of diaspora and racial domination. She also reveals that beauty becomes the central aspect of the United States for her employment prospects. The pressure of economic stability makes her modify her appearance according to the dominant social structures. This kind of racial assimilation and separation of cultural identity operates as a mechanism of oppression. Her blog takes another stand to become a symbol of resistance and power. Her thoughts mainly focus on building awareness of race, identity, and cultural differences that black women face in the dominant narratives of the United States. This counter discourse challenges and creates opportunities for her better life. “Each memory stunned her with its blinding luminosity. Each brought with it a sense of unassailable loss, a great burden hurtling towards her, and she wished she could duck, lower herself so that it would bypass her, so that she would save herself. Love was a kind of grief” (Adichie 604).

Ifemelu’s attempt to embrace natural beauty questions the existing system of Western beauty ideals. Adapting to this new culture seems like an imprisonment of culture and liberation for black women. Her journey takes a new path when she finally realises her worth and breaks free from the standards of domination. She gives up the idea and profoundly rejects American beauty standards. She decides to resist excessive modernisation. Sisi also uses resistance as a form of symbol to challenge the dehumanising conditions of sex workers in Belgium. She starts to respect natural hair and embraces her traditional values to reclaim her lost African identity. When Sisi is trafficked from Lagos to Antwerp, she is physically and

culturally displaced. "She had not come to Europe to be a whore. She had come to make money. Clean money" (Unigwe 9).

Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and admires her unchanged homeland and finds a kind of authenticity and assimilation to herself. "She had come home and it felt like the truest thing she had done in a long time" (Adichie 477). Sisi's death narrates her inability to achieve a happy homecoming. Efe, Joyce, and Ama continue their journey of self-determination and cultural identity.

The novels *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* serve as milestones in tracing the racism and exploitation of Western Eurocentric structures. It insists on celebrating the African American identity and cultural resistance as historical and political resilience. Afrocentricity examines the psychological restoration and African cultural consciousness by rejecting Western exploitation and defending the communal solidarity of African American women. Ifemelu and Sisi are the best examples of turning from being a victim to a hero of resistance and identity. The timelessness of the novel continues to empower the experience of black women navigating transnational spaces.

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