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Expatriate Experiences and Cultural Trauma: A Theoretical Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie's Americanah

Abstract:

Americanah is a narrative about emigrants, expatriate experiences and how it feels to come to back to own land feeling nothing more than numbness. The novel deals with the postcolonial elements with themes focusing mainly on migration and alienation of individuals who go in search for a better life in a foreign land and getting affected psychologically, socially and culturally on an everyday basis regardless, however, they try to mingle and blend in.

Americanah is considered as a postcolonial traumatic fiction on the basis of cultural trauma in which individual trauma is a subsidiary when considered to cultural collective trauma.

Collective trauma differs from the classical traditions of trauma in the sense that it is not based on a single traumatic occurrence. It focuses on daily psychological wounding at a community level where the individual find at a later point that the changes that happened at a foundational level are quite irretrievable.

Key Words: Cultural Trauma, collective identity, individual subjectivity, Postcolonialism, Healing

Introduction

The theme of loss of identity and anguish of arrival to a foreign land where there are cultural and sociological differences and related issues are common aspects that have been dealt with in many postcolonial fiction. *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is not an exceptional novel to this but it has opened up a new avenue of portraying individual postcolonial experiences in a broader sense. By giving instances of individual sufferings and diverse experiences, Adichie has been successful in depicting how these individual subjectivities form a collective and unified entity and how postcolonial conditions construct and modify the entire community. The question whether Trauma Theory is able to conceptualize themes of colonialism and trauma under its categorization is a problem that has been long persisting in the field of literary criticism and theory.

When Trauma studies focus on single events and occurrences that shatter the mind of individuals, the theory lags behind in giving proper explanations to those instances where trauma occurs from a series of events like colonialism, slave trade, racism etc. In certain cases, the people who are affected by trauma cannot be considered individually. Sometimes certain incidents leave the entire collective group of people equally traumatized. Though the subjectivity of each one in that collectivity is different from each other, still there is a possibility to find a similarity or a unity among the individual subjectivities. The objectivity within the subjectivities is traceable at certain points.

The important aspect of cultural trauma is not the fact that the people in the group or community in total get affected by the horrendous event, but the crucial aspect indicates how the event structures the entire discourse in such a way that it normalizes the ineffaceable changes. Thus, the memory of the event itself is a trauma for the entire community when taken as a collective whole and at the same time, it problematizes the entire collective experience, as it is culturally relevant. So, the postmemory part is very evident in cultural

trauma along with the negative aspects at the turn of horrendous events and associated emotions.

The interpretative interpretations of the everyday emotional experience as part of cultural trauma can be formulized into a continuous process that gives rise to unending meaning production. This is relevant when the whole culturally affected society is taken into consideration. The entire process of cultural trauma can be generalized as a discursive practice where the emotional experience triggered by the events are worked through and a healing attempt on the collective wound is always under consideration. Cultural traumas can be identified and explained only after a specific passage of time like individual trauma which often takes a period of latency. The collective memory in this regard forms the collective identity. In the general notion, cultural trauma is a scar that occurs in the social fabric of a community due to some horrendous event(s) and as a result, a loss of identity for the whole group is formed, not individually but collectively. The individual memory is secondary while the collective memory is given due importance in cultural trauma.

In *Americanah*, Adichie has attempted to show how individual trauma is a part of collective trauma and how cultural trauma forms a collective identity. The main theme behind the novel is the changes that happen to people who emigrate from postcolonial nations to first world nations. The novel portrays not only the trials and tribulations faced by third world people who come to the land of USA and UK, but the trauma faced by expatriates who return to their motherland and cannot get back the life they have left behind once. Through the analysis of characters and their characteristic changes, readers can find that it is not an individual thing but something more. It is very essential to identify and elaborate upon the setting as well as the change in the societal and cultural conditions that structures individual subjectivity. The title *Americanah* itself is a word that Nigerian friends of Ifemelu uses when

she comes back from America and does something or says something that shows that she has lived in the United States of America. The particular word is actually a teasing term and further interpretations can be given to it when considered in respect to the changed individuality of the character as well as the irretrievable cultural changes that happened to the identity of the collective which can never be Nigerian again. The characters lament for the loss but at the same time, they cannot afford to go back to the past life as the present society and culture have gone a long way from the past.

The voicing out part or working through the wound in the psyche by a community in the form of articulation is a typical thing that happens in cultural trauma. Here the traumatic occurrence is race that affects not one individual but the community as a whole. The people who are affected know that they are affected both in an individual basis and more than that in a collective way. It is more collective than individual in the sense that the derogatory comment or situation that they witness in their day-to-day life is not against each one as a person. It is against the whole community and that collective mockery is nonetheless secondary to the individual trauma they have been facing. Ifemelu has been affected by an individual traumatic occurrence when she has to do something against her ethics and self for want of money. But the race issue she has been facing is not a one day affair. Right from the time she has stepped in America and till the time she leaves the place, the issue of race is something that wounds her psyche as a part of the collective.

The scar that has got in their lives as well as in the identity of blacks as a community is essentially culturally oriented and the change in their identity and the enigma of the continuing situation no matter how far a country develops are factors that get normalized for the black community as time passes on. It is not a good thing that all these negative things are been normalized. But when the whole community cannot change the perceptions of others and when they cannot do anything but make their expression through blog posts or

comments, they are getting adapted to the changes and tolerate the community suffering, the issue of racism as well as their fight against racism cannot make it up to another level but gets normalized. This normalization of discursive practices itself is another characteristic feature of cultural trauma. Ifemelu is portrayed in the novel as a person who is capable of articulation. In this part also like that of individual trauma, the power of language or rather the necessity of language that is essential to depict the intensity of trauma is essential.

At the beginning of the novel, it is shown that Ifemelu goes to a parlour to braid her hair. There the black women who work in the parlour are very ordinary and ignorant people who might not even know what a blog is or they might not be even curious enough to know about those kinds of public domains. All they care is how to make money and then respect. The fact that they have missed is the knowledge that they cannot earn respect as a community, may be toleration from others or otherwise recognition that blacks are also beautiful. And that recognition also comes from a mindset to prove that whites are not racists and America is not a racist country.

The hilarious thing here is that this is an intentional act and the blacks know it. And that is why the community as a whole is disheartened when the whites act to be non-racists. The race itself is not the issue. Associated with the problem of the race there happens to be many more connected behaviours that the blacks usually confront from the whites. For example, Curt has behaved too well and has loved Ifemelu very much. He has gone to that extent where he wants to be the sole love in Ifemelu's heart.

When Ifemelu finds that Curt has been in a way cheating her by flirting via e-mails the first problem she has confronted in her mind is not the cheating part, but that the other end girl is a white and has long hair in contrast to Ifemelu. Likewise when Ifemelu cheats on him, he wants to know whether she has slept with another white as if it would have been pardonable if with a black one. The colour trauma somehow stays with Ifemelu and many

other characters who feel very much inferior and they feel it as a normalized thing to feel inferior because of colour. This kind of a normalization of certain practices make cultural trauma more intense. In one of her posts Ifemelu talks like this:

“...And here’s the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as “watermelon” or “tar baby” are used in jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about- and since you are a Non-American black, the chances that you Won’t know...You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white street. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say “You are not alone. I am here too.”In describing black women you admire, always use the word “STRONG” because that is what black women are supposed to be in America... When you watch television and hear that a “racist slur” was used, you must immediately become offended. (220)

The body shaming is essentially a cultural thing that black women used to face in America. Though it is strongly objected and considered to be very rude, even when Ifemelu walks by the supermarket, she hears such a comment. Dike texts Ifemelu that he is overjoyed by the fact that he is having a President who is black like him. And the community feels that they have a representation in politics and in power. That means that the community as a whole has not been represented or felt to be not well represented till then. For them more than the power or more than any benefits, they just want a way that they are heard or recognized in the land where the roots of the black community exist in deep agony. When they feel that there is a need of representation it is not an individual subjectivity but a community psychology that has worked out during the election. And thus the minds that are happy at the election results were not been happy and satisfied till then.

Another still prevalent problematic thing that exists in the scenario is when Obama himself has told in his statement that America is not a racist country and the land has gone beyond such barriers as racism. The black people including Ifemelu find it utterly wrong

because race is a strongly prevalent issue that they face as an everyday crisis. This is again a proof that acknowledging everything frankly and standing for something that one believes in is not an affordable thing everywhere. Especially for a black and the whole community as a group, this is a serious problem that they cannot articulate out what is inside their mind but still they feel that this is not the way that can set things right. The election campaign for Obama has been the time which Ifemelu and Blaine become close to each other after a break. There has been a gulf between their relationship as Blaine has not been able to decipher why Ifemelu has not participated in a rally organized by him in favour of a fellow black American. And Blaine does not appear to be an easily forgiving man and finally when they reconcile after a period of time, Ifemelu has felt that Blaine is not the one who can give her what she wants in her life. It is during the time when Obama has been selected as the nominee for Democratic Party, they feel close to each other again after a long time. And the occasion for the reunion is Obama because after a long time both of them have finally felt that they are in this together because both of them want Obama to win.

Dike is a person who has started living in a foreign land from the age of two. In a way, he does not totally belong to the Igbo black community like Uju and Ifemelu. And it is not due to the contact with Ifemelu that he rejoices when Obama becomes the president telling that his president is black like him. This shows that though he does not consciously belong to the world of the African community, in a way he is. Though there are many foreign influences running through him, he basically, becomes a part of the black community though Uju does not even talk Igbo in front of him or reminds him of the black legacy he is part of. When he decides to cease his life one day by taking pills, Uju does not think about it much further because she believes that it is kind of a common tendency among American teenagers and she categorizes it under depression of a kind that just needs a consultation with the therapist.

Later in the form of an accusation, Ifemelu asks Uju whether Dike has attempted to commit suicide because he does not know who he really is. Once Dike mentioned that they are all black folks, Uju immediately corrected him saying that he is not black. Uju's intention has not been negative, all she has wanted is that Dike shall not think that all the bad things that happen in his life or the odd behaviour of people towards him is because he is black. Ifemelu at this point sternly tells her that she has told him what he is not but has not told what he is. Ifemelu has meant that without the proper knowledge of own identity anyone can lapse into a suicide thought when things go wrong altogether. When Dike has taken pills to take his life, he has also eaten anti-nauseating drugs so that the life-threatening pills would stay in his stomach. This shows the seriousness of the act he has done.

Ifemelu has understood the condition in which Dike has attempted to commit suicide and she has told Uju that no one will get up in the morning and get depressed as Uju tells that the suicide tendency in American teenagers is a common thing. Ifemelu feels the growing pain in Dike underneath his light laughter and seemingly normal behaviour. Though Ifemelu and other black people have mentioned that during their life in America they have sensed a strange sense of alienation, they cannot do anything to let out those emotions outside. With the articulation through various ways, they let their trauma reach outside and then only they are able to survive in a foreign land compromising their dignity and even identity sometimes. But for people like Dike who has not been allowed to come out of that stage, suicide is not a result of depression but escape from the whole scenario that kills their life moments.

There is a significant "Othering" that happens in the novel where the whites are always superior and blacks show and attempt to be part of their community and imitate their ways and assimilate their thought process, but cannot become exactly like them. Uju is an example of that like many other characters in the novel. Dike's suicide attempt may be the product of alienation or the lack of finding his own self in a foreign land where he cannot

completely belong. This is evident when he says to Ifemelu after reaching Lagos for a visit. He wishes to have the language ability to speak Igbo. And at the time when he speaks, he gives out a sigh that may be he does not belong to Nigeria too as he cannot catch up with the language at a later stage. The situation of Dike is thus complicated. He is part of a black community and he cannot speak his mother tongue. He is brought up in a foreign land where he does not totally belong to and that is a very complicated zone.

With her experiences and observations in America, Ifemelu has addressed many issues that she has found so problematic for the black people living in America. In one of her posts, she addresses a series of ordinary mundane things that all people do in their life. The interesting fact about the matters she has addressed is that for all these simple and common things, most of the people in her community readily face so many challenges. She has said that they live under the continuous peril that when they go shopping in a nice store, they fear getting followed and harassed. The people cannot even criticize the government. If whites do that it becomes proper criticism and if the blacks do that it is labelled as a cultural disorder. The black people have a bad time because whatever others do they feel that it is because of the race they belong to.

When they are pulled over by a traffic cop or when some prestigious social clubs delay their membership they immediately get a feeling that probably it is a race thing because even the mainstream television shows and news media portrays them in such a light. Even if someone in their community has done something really good in their career, they are appreciated mainly for the “difference” that person has shown from the majority of people in his or her community. Even during the time of immediate help or medical emergency they fear that their race is something that works against them and in that fear, even to move into a new house, they have to think twice whether the neighbourhood would invite them or not and

that too for the obvious reason stated. And above all, they have to really work hard for a bank loan as the officials see the black people as financially unreliable.

The community gets a feeling of different treatment everywhere because they have been through such a life and those experiences have created a void in their psyche so strong that coming out of it is a next to impossible task. Logically speaking there are chances of black people been treated badly and at the same time in a good way also. Maybe it is always a mix of both. But when the community conscious analyses the situations they feel all of it in a negative way. This is the result of the cultural traumatic condition that the community has witnessed from time to time. They clearly know that there is a void in the collective psyche and they are equally aware of the situations in which such an awful thing has happened but they do not know how to fix it or how to make things right.

There are many things mentioned in the novel that the black community suffers as a scar from long back. The coinage and certain specific uses of particular words are not just for communication purposes but to intend something more than what is communicated. Even the word “culture” sometimes means race and by “urban” it is intended as black and poor. More than that the words associated with “urban” are possibly dangerous and potentially exciting. When Curt starts dating Ifemelu, he tries to find mysteriously exciting things about her sexuality. He wants to experiment with Ifemelu and it is not something he would do with any other whites or other ethnic groups but only with the black Ifemelu. He finds Ifemelu as a source for various exciting things that are so curious for him. Likewise, along with that potentially exciting part comes the possibly dangerous part associated with the black community.

They try to speak like Whites, they get the American accent by practice and understand a few cultural codes that are so new to them and try to blend in. When that fails, they return to where they belong to. They try to uplift African culture; they try to criticize the

changes that have happened in their homeland after their departure and find a deep pleasure in knowing that they still have a say about their “own “ things. And on the final stage, they get to know that what they have thought of as their “own” has been changed and as they have not witnessed that change they cannot simply become part of it. Uju’s date Bartholomew has kept on talking about Nigeria and how much it has changed. He opines that the culture has deteriorated recently and the girls in Nigeria have been using modern clothes only recently. Ifemelu goes against this viewpoint. Bartholomew belongs to a group who does not know where they belong and what should they do after making some money in a foreign land.

In comparison to Ifemelu’s experiences, Obinze has been through some more bitter tough times and events leading to his deportation. While he has been with his cousin and his wife, he has seen how people are changes beyond belief and the intensity of those changes that seem to erase the past. Nicholas and Ojiugo have been the most talked and popular people back in Nsukka for their public display of affection and their child like nature. Even though they seem to be in a good financial condition in American without the tension of a fake ID or fear of getting caught, Obinze finds it too difficult that their internal relationship has changed to an extreme extent that they cannot do anything about it. “That Nicholas had lost his youthful outrageousness did not surprise Obinze; what surprised him was the loss of even the smallest memory of it” (238).

Nicholas has not told Obinze anything but certain advice about surviving in America and the steps that are essential to do for that. The surprising element is not the distance that Nicholas has for Obinze, but his formal and detached way with his wife Ojiugo with whom he has been so free. And another aspect is Ojiugo’s reaction to Nicholas saying “Yes Nicholas” for each and everything as if she feels that Nicholas is completely normal with her and family. She does not mind the changes in their relationship and emotional intensity with

Nicholas as she feels it a normalized thing. But Obinze in his short stay in their house has identified that there are many things that Nicholas does not talk out with anyone.

Here a parallel can be drawn in the behaviours of Dike and Nicholas in the way they do not get a chance to express their feelings and to let out their emotions which is deeply held in the intricacies of their mind. "On weekends Nicholas walked around the house in a tense cloud of silence, nursing his worries" (239). This nature of Nicholas shows that there is a pea plant of trauma growing inside his mind and he does not know how to explain what he has inside him.

The problem is not only with people who belong to the black community in a foreign land. Ifemelu has gone to Nigeria after a long time in America because she just longed for it. And by taking that decision to return to her homeland she feels that she would find her missing part back in the home. She thinks that as she is born and brought up in Nigeria until she has left for America, it would be totally a comfortable thing for her to come back. Coming back home is in a way coming back to one's own memories. Memories are very important in cultural trauma because the memories include memory on collective community conscious and getting a reminder about the past cultural conditions is indeed a trauma relief.

Ifemelu has longed to go back to the time and conditions where she has been the bold teenager who has been living a life of peace in spite of many problems. Back in Lagos when she has come back from America, she meets her friends and relatives in the hope that it would finally make her the earlier Ifemelu. But reaching Lagos does not make that kind of a feeling in her and on the contrary, she has been unable to grasp many things even on the way to Ranyinudo's home. She has become so startled by the city and it is not about the passage of time that has created it but unknown things about her that make her see it in a different way.

To the astonishment of Ifemelu, she feels so comforted by the fact she still has a blue passport in her bag so that if she finds it too much intolerable she still has an option with her to go back. Her excitement and amusement in coming back to her homeland decreased suddenly when she has found out that Nigeria is not a country with a lot of living facilities like that of America. When she meets her friend she has found that everyone has changed a lot in respect to every fact that she has known them for. When people talk with her, she does not belong to their world and she does not want that kind of a belonging to happen too. Somewhere in her mind, she knows it very well that she is a home returned expatriate and she cannot be like Nigerians. And from the post, she has posted in her blog at a later date it is clear that she is not the only one like this.

They are many people who have come back to their homeland in order to have a grip and a peaceful life by investing money in Nigeria and having a family in the place where their ancestors have lived. All of them moan for a changed Lagos in infrastructure and living standard but the old homeland in its spirits and warmth. The speciality of Ifemelu is that she has understood it without any delay that Lagos will never be like New York. Upon meeting her parents, who love to talk about their foreign-returned daughter and her relatives who want something from her as a gift and her friends who have come to see how much she has changed, Ifemelu gets to know it clearly that the scar that is left behind in the community conscience which includes individuals like her is not something that can be faded with the passage of time. In her blog, she writes like this.

Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been undisputably itself, but you would not know this at the Nigeropolitan club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos had ever been close to being like New York (421)

Conclusion

One of the major indicators of cultural trauma is the emergence of public discourses in which collective foundations are opened for reflection, and thus the formation of a collective community, opines Erikson, a cultural trauma theorist, in *Everything in its path* (Erikson 185). In the particular novel taken for the analysis of cultural trauma, it is evident that Ifemelu's blog post and the comments underneath those posts are platforms where this kind of a thought process happens and it is a space where the foundational notions of the community collective get a way for expressing themselves. But as a matter of fact, the novel also depicts the shortcomings of awareness about the feeling of cultural trauma among the participants of the community.

Except for Ifemelu, no one in the character list shows that much affected by the changed cultural situations. Though collective trauma as a theory finds individual trauma secondary as it deeply concentrates on the psychic scar that affects the community, it can be found from the novel that individual trauma is definitely a major aspect that defines the intensity of cultural trauma at an individual basis. Cultural trauma is obviously a major factor that determines the personality as well as the psyche of any individual belonging to that collective. But it should not undermine the effect of individual trauma that sometimes increases the intensity of cultural trauma. When applying the theory of cultural trauma in the novel, Ifemelu's individual trauma is somehow subsided but that individual trauma is what that has accentuated the cultural traumatic elements she has been part of. Adichie's *Americanah* is a strong depiction of both emigrant and the immigrant experience. Likewise, it has a potential to reciprocate to contemporary theories such as various aspects of Postcolonialism and Trauma Theory. Application of Trauma Theory in the nuances of postcolonial fiction is an area where there exists still more openings for further research and interpretations.

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