

Cultural alienation and exploitation: The immigrant experience in Chimamanda Adichie's "Arrangers of marriage"

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Abstract

Africans who desire universal acceptability in the Western world find themselves culturally alienated from their African root. This alienation leads to loss of identity and individuality in language, tradition, customs, values, beliefs, food and naming of the African people. Language is a vehicle of culture and it is influenced by culture; and naming gives a person individuality and identity. The loss of one's indigenous name symbolizes his/her complete alienation psychologically from his/her fatherland. This paper observes that the alienated Africans find themselves in the web of multi-dimensional exploitation. Using the post-colonial theory in Chimamanda Adichie's "Arrangers of Marriage", a short story in the collection, The Thing Around Your Neck, this paper argues that the desire of the immigrants to be accepted in the American society compel them to relinquish their African identity and culture by abandoning their African names and language; and assuming American ones thereby exposing themselves to psychological cultural alienation which prevents them from achieving cultural identity, personality and individuality. The paper concludes that knowledge of one's language enhances cultural connectivity; therefore, Africans should resist cultural alienation and should rather cherish their values which are not inferior to Western values.

Keywords: Alienation, Culture, Exploitation, Immigrant

Introduction

Culture is a people's way of life which is transmitted from one generation to another. This transmission which has become an integral part of the people's behaviour instills values into the younger generation. The quest to be universally accepted has compelled many Africans to be culturally alienated from their root. This alienation is either physically or psychologically; the physical alienation is that which the individual is physically uprooted from the African soil. On the other hand, the psychological alienation has to do with the individual's psyche that considers everything African to be inferior, hence the need to change them and replace them with Western ideals. These include names, values, beliefs, food, language and tradition. The African who succumbs to the pressure to be

universally accepted alienates himself or herself culturally from the African root. The cultural alienation exposes the African to exploitation as he or she is neither an African nor an American. The exploitation takes different dimensions such as economic exploitation, sham marriage, blackmail, menial jobs and even sexual exploitation.

Cultural exploitation and alienation in the context of this paper is the deliberate rejection of African values by Africans in the quest for international acceptability. This rejection creates room for the African to be exploited. These issues are discussed using Chimamanda Adichie's "The Arrangers of Marriage", a short story in her collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

The short story is a genre that has suffered neglect by literary critics. More attention



has been paid to the novel. This neglect is worrisome because budding writers experiment firstly with the short story and the easiest place for students to start learning the concepts of analysis and evaluation of a work of art is from the short story. This issue of neglect has been raised by Charles Nnolim thus:

We all have, up to now, neglected the short story as a genre worthy of critical attention, even though there is already a respectable body of short stories written by our most celebrated writers. Whatever the case may be, our critics must be reminded that the short story as a genre is still stillborn on the African literary scene (51-6).

In corroboration of the above outcry, Ernest Emenyonu in an Editorial in *Writing Africa in the Short Story* which he entitled "Once Upon a Time Begins a Story" has noted that "Three decades later, nothing has changed; the critical gap in the criticism of African literature decried by Nnolim remains unaddressed, unfulfilled. If anything, the gap has become wider and deeper"(1).

It is on this note that this paper focuses on the short story. The structure and elements for analyzing both the short story and the novel are generally the same. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* note that:

A short story is a brief work of prose fiction, and most of the terms for analyzing the component elements, the types, and the narrative techniques of the novel are applicable to the short story as well(295).

The concept of postcolonialism

Adichie is a postcolonial writer who seeks to uphold the African ethos through her characters. Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary*

Theory argue that "Postcolonialism seeks to undermine the imperialist subject"(189). They note that "From a postcolonial perspective, Western values and traditions of thought and literature,...are guilty of a repressive ethnocentrism" (188). Postcolonialism is a theory that undermines western values and champions African values.

Using post colonialism, this paper discusses Adichie's "The Arrangers of Marriage", a short story in the collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and concludes that western values which alienate Africans from their roots should be jettisoned.

Loss of identity in "arrangers of marriage"

Identity is an integral part of culture, and there are several things that give one an identity. They include: language, custom, traditions, beliefs, names and food. In "The Arrangers of Marriage", Ofodile in his desperation to be acculturated into the American system relinquishes his African name, a name that gives him an identity, to answer Dave Bell. He is oblivious of the fact that by relinquishing his identity, he has been culturally alienated from his root. Chike Ekeopara in *Ethical Order and Stability in Traditional Igbo Society* notes that:

Culture embraces all the values, norms and ethical principles which are put in place by a people to guide its patterns of social relations and interactions in order to ensure order and stability of society (18).

Language is also an aspect of culture. Western society uses language to conquer Africans, hence, the tendency of immigrants despising their language in order to be accepted in the American society. Ofodile inundates his newly married Nigerian wife Chinasa with American clichés that are irritating, after changing his name to Dave Bell. Rose Sackeyfio



in “Diaspora Identities in Short Fiction” argues that “He pressures Chinasa to do the same by assuming a new name, Agatha Bell, and by adopting new behaviours such as speaking only English, and cooking American food. He is critical of immigrants who maintain their ethnic identities...” (108).

Ofodile alienates himself from his culture and root to the extent of being ashamed of his Nigerian delicacy which is cherished by his American neighbour. After relishing the coconut rice prepared by his wife, he goes ahead and buys *Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook* for her to learn how to cook American dishes, because according to him, “I don’t want us to be seen as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food”(179). He culturally alienates himself from his roots through changing his name to American name, despising his Igbo language and by being ashamed of his Nigerian food. He tells the wife, “I’m not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave”(172). He trivializes the matter without realizing that he has alienated himself culturally. He does not only change his first name, but his entire name. “The last name I use here is different, too. Americans have a hard time with Udenwa, so I changed it”(172). He fails in his responsibilities to educate the Americans on the significance of African (Nigerian) names. Chinua Achebe in “The Novelist as a Teacher” prays that God should “help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement”(105).

He imposes his ideology on his wife Chinasa, who cherishes her African heritage and identity. He also changes her name to Agatha Bell, and warns her that, “You don’t understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here”(172).

By Ofodile’s reckoning, being in the mainstream translates into disconnecting oneself from any trait of African identity.

Exploitation of the African man

Africans (Nigerians) who emigrate to America in search of greener pastures discover that the self-fulfillment they desire eludes them. They work so hard, yet they are paid so little. This amounts to economic exploitation. Ofodile experiences this kind of exploitation as he tells his wife, “Interns are paid twenty-eight thousand a year but work about eighty hours a week. It’s like three dollars an hour”(174). This is a departure from the forty-eight hours a week that is obtainable in Nigeria, but because of his obsession with the American system, Ofodile does not realize that he is being exploited economically.

Ofodile is unaware of the fact that America is an exploitative society that thrives on racism, sexism and inequality in all facets of its social institutions. Aguirre and Baker in *Structured Inequality in the United States* note that, “Unfortunately...American society is intrinsically racist and sexist”(xviii). Many Africans (Nigerians) in search of green card in America get involved in a marriage with American women. This kind of marriage is exploitative in the sense that the marriage is contracted out of desperation. The American women take advantage of the desperation on the faces of these men and exploit them through blackmail. Again, Ofodile is caught in this web. He contracts a marriage with an American woman, but while the marriage still subsists, he comes to Nigeria and marries an Igbo girl. This double standard life boomerangs and he tells his new wife:

The American woman I married to get a green card is making trouble...our divorce was almost



final, but not completely, before I married you in Nigeria. Just a minor thing, but she found out about it and now she's threatening to report me to Immigration. She wants more money(182).

The exploitation is not only through blackmail, but also through financial gratification, the American woman wants to exploit Ofodile financially; firstly, because they are in business, and secondly; because Ofodile has violated the contractual agreement. In trying to justify his actions, he tells his wife:

It was just on paper. A lot of our people do that here. It's business, you pay the woman and both of you do paperwork together but sometimes it goes wrong and either she refuses to divorce you or she decides to blackmail you(183).

Ofodile is a man caught in-between two worlds, in his effort to fit into the two cultures; he suffers from identity crisis and alienation. He is neither here nor there, and Ifeoma Onyemelukwe in "Search for Lost Identity" argues that a man such as Ofodile is "caught between two worlds, two civilizations(Western and traditional African), two value systems"(36). The desire to be accepted in the American society compels many Africans (Nigerians) into this kind of marriages. The American way of life makes them to relinquish their African identity and culture which upholds the sanctity of marriage.

Ofodile vents his frustration on his innocent wife for his inability to achieve his goals. He ridicules and castigates her for not being a virgin as predicted by his mother. He tells her, "I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin....I probably should tell her how wrong she was"(184). His action conforms with what Gary Colombo *et al* argue in

Rereading America about frustrated people. They argue that:

Frustrated people may easily strike out against the perceived cause of their frustration. However, this reaction is not always possible because the true source of the frustration is often too nebulous to be identified or too powerful to act against. In such instances the result may be a displaced or free-floating aggression; in this situation the frustrated individual or group usually redirects the aggressiveness against a more visible, vulnerable, and socially sanctioned target, one unable to strike back(568).

Ofodile thinks he could unleash his frustration on Chinasa, his vulnerable wife from Nigeria, but Adichie creates her to be able to resist the imposition of western ideals because she is proud of her African (Nigerian) identity.

Resistance of cultural alienation

Chimamanda Adichie as a post-colonial African female writer creates female characters who resist imperialistic tendencies and uphold the African identity. This is imperative since identity accords one a personality. Ini Uko in *Gender and Identity* argues that:

The human quest for identity as an effectual, essential and authentic person constitutes a natural reaction to the centuries of assault, denuding and impairment that the human being has suffered from various forces of an oppressive and engulfing other or majority(xiii).

Adichie uses Chinasa to resist cultural alienation from the African (Nigerian) ancestry. Chinasa resists the new name her husband has ascribed to



her and states thus: “I never have, my English name is just something on my birth Certificate. I’ve been Chinasa Okafor my whole life”(172). By this action, Chinasa has resisted the western imposition and has carved a Nigerian identity for herself. Katrin Berndt notes that:

Postcolonial discourse has examined the modes of identity formation and the modes of resistance, as well as the impact of language, social structures, and the cultural traditions on these processes. It interrogates the colonial ascriptions, and challenges the disabling images that were forced upon the native population of occupied societies(5).

Through Chinasa, Adichie ridicules Ofodile in the manner in which he adores and cherishes the American system over his African (Nigerian) system, “sneering, as though he was the one who had invented the superior American system”(173). This brings his personality to question as he is doubly alienated both from his African root and the American society which he struggles to fit into.

Again, Adichie creates Chinasa to resist cultural alienation through the use of Igbo language. She is not ashamed to speak her language both at home and outside the home, despite the fact that the husband resents it and impresses on her the importance of speaking the English language in America. He tells her, “Speak English. There are people behind you”(177). Ofodile is ashamed of his language as he considers it inferior and an obstacle to his being admitted into the American society. Sackeyfio in “Diaspora Identities” notes that “In coping with the immigrant experience, her husband Ofodile Emeka has renamed himself Dave, and rejects his Nigerian identity as a route

to success in America”(108). Ofodile considers other nationals who speak their language as failures in America. He slights them thus:

Look at the people who shop here; they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries. He gestured, dismissively, toward a woman and her two children, who were speaking Spanish. They will never move forward unless they adapt to America(175).

Chinasa cherishes her Igbo(Nigerian) identity, that is why she introduces herself as such to Nia, a black American lady who prefers an African name. Chinasa realizes that the husband has culturally alienated himself as she wonders, “Oh, I said and shook my head; she, a black American, had chosen an African name, while my husband made me change mine to an English one”(180). She forms a bond with Nia, because she finds something in her that binds them together – African identity. Sackeyfio notes that Chinasa’s “expectations for happiness and security are ruined by the contradictions and confused identity of her Nigerian husband”(107).

Chinasa makes sure she continuously connects herself to her Igbo(Nigerian) root by speaking the language to herself; she goes further to teach her new found friend Nia the simple ones. She tells us the readers, “we spoke only English now; he did not know that I spoke Igbo to myself while I cooked, that I had taught Nia how to say “I’m hungry” and “see you tomorrow in Igbo”(182). In recognition of this fact, Eve Eisenberg notes that Adichie is “an artist who takes up her pen in order to present a ‘true image’ of African people and the African past in order to contest racist misrepresentations and erasures”(9). Adichie uses Chinasa to resist racial prejudices and the concomitant inferiority complex exhibited by African(Nigerian)



immigrants in America because, she is proud of her Nigerian identity. Berndt notes that, "Identity construction has developed into one of the most vital subjects of research in postcolonial discourse"(5).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the concepts of cultural alienation and exploitation as they relate to immigrants in America in "The Arrangers of Marriage". Using postcolonialism as a theory, the paper argues that the physical and psychological disconnection of one from his or

her root amounts to cultural alienation, as culture is the totality of a people's way of life which involves traditions, customs, language, beliefs, names and food. This paper however concludes that Adichie as a post-colonial African female writer advocates the return of Africans (Nigerians) to their cherished culture which is in no way inferior to the western culture. Adichie achieves this through her female characters Chinasa(a Nigerian woman) and Nia(a black American woman)

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