



Displacement and Migration in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

¹Madhumitha Ponnudurai, ²Padma Priya A,

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mepco Schlenk Engineering College, Sivakasi

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Standard Firework Rajarathnam College for women, Sivakasi

Abstract: This paper analyzes a selection of two postcolonial works, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. It examines the concept of displacement and migration and the circumstances that prompt them to leave their country of origin in search of a better life in foreign lands. It also elects to explore the postcolonial experiences and conditions of the migrants in the selected novels. Both contemporary authors, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Zadie Smith, explore serious issues such as displacement, race, the push factors and survival instincts of migration, the mixed reception, colonial legacies, the identity crisis, and multiculturalism in their novels. This paper aims at delving into the complexities of migration, the causes and consequences of this phenomenon, and its impact on individuals from Third World countries. And it is an attempt to reveal how Orientalism and displacement shaped the postcolonial identity, as characters are shaped by both the expectations of their home cultures and the stereotypes imposed by their new societies. It also aims to provide insight into how these struggles lead them to create new and hybrid identities.

Keywords: Migration, Displacement, Post-colonialism, Identity crisis, Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

Migration is interpreted as the movement of persons away from their habitual residence, either across an international border or within a state. It has both positive and negative connotations. It could be viewed with positive connotations when people move from their usual residence to start a new job, to seek better living conditions. And it could be viewed with negative connotations when people migrate to escape political oppression, conflict, violence, disaster or any other violations. On the other hand, displacement is the forced movement of persons who are obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence in order to avoid the conflicts, war, political instability, violence or human-made disasters.

Migrant literature and postcolonial literature express some considerable overlap. In parallel, displacement is also a key term in post-colonial theory which applies to all migrant situations. In all, it pertains to both physical displacement and a sense of being “out of place” socially or culturally. In the twentieth century, the main focus of research has been on the mass-migration which include European migration to North America or Australia, Arab migration to America after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, African and Asian migration from former colonies into Europe and exile situations of German dissidents during the Nazi period. There is a wide range of rationale for migration, such as labor migration, climate migration, irregular migration and forced migration or displacement.

In contemporary literature, migration and displacement are the main motifs, which reflect the global experiences of movement, loss, identity crisis, belongingness and cultural hybridity. Some notable migration writers are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and Noviolet Bulawayo, Jhumpa Lahiri, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Zadie Smith, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston in contemporary literature. Some notable works with themes are Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and few more. The key aspects of the themes portrayed in the modern works are how migrants straddled two worlds. For instance, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* highlight the identity crisis faced by first and second-generation immigrants in the U.S and London. In this paper, we have chosen to analyze selected novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* to explore the impact of displacement and migration in their characters and lives.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a highly acclaimed and influential Nigerian author who is known for her powerful and eloquent storytelling and global narratives in her works. She offers rich insights into contemporary issues such as identity, cultural conflict, race and gender. Zadie Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth* explores the root and significant issues faced by first and second generation immigrants in multicultural England. This novel touches on the treatment of immigrants from 1975 to 2000 and questions religion, science, love, war, race and ethnicity. It gives voice to multiple characters.

2. Literature review

A great deal of research has been done and many academicians delved into the complex themes of migration, displacement, identity loss in ‘*Americanah*’ and ‘*White Teeth*’. In a study, the researcher observed that, “Adichie skillfully captures their psychological and emotional struggles with racism, cultural displacement and self-discovery in communities that frequently marginalize their origins”(Gheytasi & Salami, 2024).

In the article, *The Pain of Exile in Americanah*, Maria Helena Lima studied the psychological and emotional effects of migration. The author examined the characters' feelings of displacement and yearning for a sense of belonging in this novel. Lima, in her research emphasis on the psychological costs of navigating a society that does not always acknowledge their multiple identities resonated with the themes of exile and emigration.(Lima,2015) In her dissertation,*The construction of a Black Female Migrant Identity in Chimamanda*

Ngozi Adichie's Americanah Naziha Benkhaoua, says that the novel, *Americanah* “highlights the ways in which race, gender, culture and migration intersect to shape migrant women’s identities”. (Benkhaoua, 2024, "Abstract")

In the study, Osienka Osinimu Alao, a Nigerian writer, exhumes that people of African descent wish to migrate to the West to seek a better life, however ends up disappointedly as they have to settle for menial jobs, face cultural alienation, identity crisis, and other immigrant issues. And he concludes that “African political elite have to awaken from their slumber to develop their continent in order to curb the menace of migration and also Africans must continue to assert their culture in a world overridden by Westernisation”. (Alao, 2024, p. 200)

In the research, “The Struggle to Belong in Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche’s *Americanah*: Cultural Identity, the Effects of Immigration on Personal Growth”, the author, Hannah Watson explored the struggles, personal growth of the protagonist Ifemelu, the effects of immigration and belonging. She concludes that this novel presents a powerful African woman who chooses to move back to her native instead of the westernized world which is often romanticized. And it shows that after a journey of self-acceptance, she led back to her native where she finally belonged. (Watson, 2021)

In her research, “Exploring the Trauma of Immigration in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*” Soumia Hamel, examined the experiences and trauma faced by Third World Immigrants, which aims to provide a better understanding of the complicated psychological and emotional toll of migration.

The significant challenges such as language barriers, cultural disparities, discrimination, difficult and tiring journey encountered by immigrants in the host country. She concluded that “...people can contribute to a more empathetic and compassionate society that recognizes and values the resilience and contributions of those who have undergone the challenges of migration”. (Hamel, 2020, p.76)

In an attempt to explore societal issues such as race, class, and cultural conflicts in Zadie Smith’s novels in, “Navigating Multicultural Waters: Exploring Race, Identity, and Society in Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth'” the researcher, observed how characters struggle in multicultural society and reveals the complexities of identity formation in a culturally diverse society. (Manikandan & Gnanamuttu, 2023)

In his thesis, “An Investigation of Immigrants’ Attitudes towards “Other” Immigrants in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*”, Muhammet Gunduz enhances a deeper understanding of the difficulties and intellectual evolution of immigrants’ attitudes towards other immigrants in multinational societies. It is concluded that a general awareness and change in society is required to reduce social norms, prejudices and discrimination. These could be achieved through education, media and politics and through open communication between immigrant communities. Therefore the better standards of communication, will create a better society to live for immigrants in a multicultural society. (GÜNDÜZ, 2024)

Therefore, several research had been made on both novels individually related to migration and displacement. Thus far, very little research has been made to explore the comparison of themes between these two selected novels. Thus we have decided to analyze immigrant experience and its impact, strategies of cultural assimilation

and resistance, psychological displacement, identity formation through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism and Displacement.

3. Method

Edward Said's seminal critical work "Orientalism" (1978) examines how Western attitudes have constructed and represented the "Orient" as backward, exotic, uncivilized, irrational contrasting with the rational and developed West. The key aspects include power and knowledge stereotyping, cultural impact and Epistemological critique in this work. Both novels, *Americanah* and *White Teeth*, critique broader questions of race, migration, and identity and they share his critical lens on how power representation and stereotypes shape the experiences of the 'Other' in the West.

Edward Said discusses his own experience of displacement in his autobiography, "Out of Place: A Memoir" (Said, 1999). He gives an account of his rearing as a Palestinian Christian who was born in Jerusalem and raised in Cairo. He also recounts his education in colonial and Western institutions, altogether his displacement in his childhood and youth leaves him perpetually 'out of place'. He explores how displacement creates a sense of alienation, disintegration of his origins and loss of identity. This memoir provides a deep personal account of his displacement, which reflects many of the themes such as exile, identity and cultural marginalization.

He considers this displacement as a fundamental aspect of the immigrant and exilic experience, a broader condition of modern existence particularly for colonized and marginalized peoples. This study resonates with this concept of displacement in the selected novels of Adichie's *Americanah* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Adichie critiques Western perceptions of Africa, which echoes Said's critique of dominant narratives that alienate and "other" displacement individuals in the host country. In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith manifests the experiences of first and second generation immigrants in Britain, which explores the themes of hybridity and intergenerational conflict.

4. Discussion

In this study, we have chosen the characters such as Aunt Uju, and Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Samad Iqbal, Irie Jones in *White Teeth* specifically to explore the impacts of migration and displacement. Aunt Uju and Samad Iqbal have migrated to their host country for a better life. They both struggle with preservation of their original cultural self. They both experience profound psychological fragmentation. These characters' struggles and impacts are explored using Edward Said's Orientalism and Displacement.

In *Americanah*, Aunt Uju's migration from Nigeria to the United States is driven by necessity. She was a wealthy and respected mistress of a powerful Nigerian general but finds herself struggling as an immigrant doctor, who deals with financial instability, downward social mobility and racism in America. She confronts racism, financial struggles, and a demanding medical profession, which affect her sense of self-worth and stability. Through her, Adichie portrays the complexities of balancing survival with maintaining cultural identity in a

foreign land. Her challenges adapting to her new life and grappling with a loss of status are vividly illustrated through scenes where she reflects on her diminished standing in the U.S.

When Aunt Uju got the acceptance letter from the 'United States Medical Licensing', after so many tries, she worried about her appearance at the upcoming interviews: She said, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair... If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional". (Adichie, 2013, p.119) When Ifemelu asked whether there are no doctors with braided hair in America, she replied, "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed." (Adichie, 2013, p.119)

These lines capture the realities of racism, insecurity, and pressures faced by Black immigrants in America. Aunt Uju plans to move in and start a life with Bartholomew to lead a secure life with her son Dike. This decision makes Ifemelu think that, Aunt Uju, "...Aunt Uju had settled merely for what for familiar." (Adichie, 2013, p.118) And Ifemelu feels that, "Aunt Uju Had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. Obinze said it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity." (Adichie, 2013, p.119)

Aunt Uju settles in Warrington, a town with Bartholomew, she collects all her dissatisfactions and spills them out when Ifemelu visits her. She shares her experience in the public library the other day when she forgot to bring out the unreturned book from her handbag. And the guard told her, " You people never do anything right" (Adichie, 2013, p.182) And She told her experience in the examining room as a doctor and her patient asked "Is the doctor coming?" and when she said she was the doctor the patient's face changed to fired clay" (Adichie, 2013, p.182). And later that evening, that patient called to transfer her file to another doctor's life which really humiliates her.

On the other hand, the protagonist of this novel, Ifemelu, faces the immigration and displacement experiences in a different way. At first, Ifemelu decides to study in the United States when Universities strike under Nigerian military dictatorship and she is granted a scholarship for the University in Philadelphia. In this point, Adichie uses hair as a symbol to express the differentiation the black immigrants face in America. The Protagonist, Ifemelu tries to use a relaxer to straighten her hair at home. Then she goes to a hairdresser. There she leaves with burns, "Just a little burn, the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!." (Adichie, 2013, p.203) However, Ifemelu feels that she couldn't recognize herself and felt mournful. She feels a sense of loss after this.

One morning, Ifemelu gets a call from a telemarketer, a young, male American who explains an offer for phone rates. At the end of the conversation, the telemarketer asked her and repeated with exaggerated ways to know whether it is a French name. She replies that it is Nigerian. And he says, "Wow. Cool. You sound totally American." (Adichie, 2013, p.175) First she feels very happy and feels that she has a garland around her neck for this compliment that "You sound American." Then she asks herself, "Why was it a compliment, an

accomplishment, to sound American?.” Then she resolves to stop faking the American accent and She feels, “... and feels a rush of pleasure... This was truly her...” (Adichie, 2013, p.175)

At a dinner party in Manhattan, a white man said, “Obama will end racism in this country”, and race was never an issue for them. For this, Ifemelu replies it is a lie. She says, “The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America... they will say we’re overreacting or we’re being too sensitive...”(Adichie,2013, p.291)

Ifemelu shares her experience in a long email to Wambui who suggests she should start a blog and write. Then she starts a blog and she calls it, “Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the subject of Blackness in America”. Then she writes her blog where she gets many followers and fame. She posts about race, non-American experiences and so on. Then she is identified as ‘The Blogger’. At the end, she decides to return to her native and even before she moves back to her native, a hairdresser asks, “Why you don’t have relaxed?”. Ifemelu replies, “ I like my hair the way God made it”.(Adichie, 2013,p,14)

Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism which critiques Western stereotyping of the East, and his exploration of displacement are relevant to understand Aunty Uju’s and Ifemelu’s experience in *Americanah*. Aunty Uju subjects her to systemic biases that exoticize or diminish her identity as an African woman. She grapples with issues of identity, belonging, and the challenge of adjusting to life in a new country. She tries to assimilate the dominant culture by altering her accent, by suppressing aspects of her cultural heritage and embracing American norms to avoid marginalization.

Samad Iqbal in the novel, *White Teeth* as a Bangladeshi immigrant in Britain, struggles to reconcile his cultural heritage with the demands of a modern, multicultural society. These struggles manifest a deep sense of inadequacy and resentment in his mind and life. His inability to fully integrate or preserve his identity leads to guilt, anger, and strained relationships. He embodies the conflict of an individual who is both exoticized and marginalized in his host country. He deeply yearns to assert his identity in an environment shaped by colonial legacies. These resonate Edward Said's Orientalism and his concepts of displacements.

Samad Iqbal experiences colonial gaze as a Bangladeshi immigrant. He struggles with Western stereotyping of Muslim masculinity. Through this character, Zadie Smith, explores the psychological tension between cultural authenticity and assimilation of the immigrant. He feels alienated from his original cultural context too and his nostalgic resistance keeps him away from complete assimilation of the dominant culture.

His immigrant experiences and his displacement from his home land are vividly illustrated whenever he feels diminished in his job as a waiter, who is from a descendant of the war hero Mangal Pande. This fuels his resentment and internal conflict about his status in Britain. He always longs for the cultural purity of Bangladesh and laments the loss of traditional values in his children and says that it is hard for him to raise good Muslim boys living in the White dominant country.

He always feels deeply regret about leaving Bangladesh, and feels displaced and also alienated in Britain. He laments that his family is losing their cultural and religious identity in the Western World. To preserve his cultural identity, he sends one of his sons, Magid, to Bangladesh to ensure he grows up with his traditional values. However, Magid decides not to follow it and it leads to unintended consequences. This expresses his internal conflict about cultural belongingness. He struggles with feeling like a perpetual outsider and even feels disconnected from his sons' British cultural experiences.

5. Conclusion

Both novels deal with the themes of identity and self-reconciliation. Both challenge diaspora displacement and critique migration experiences where characters' affirm cultural authenticity. However, both endings emphasize the fluid nature of identity, but approach resolution differently *Americanah* offers a sense of closure through homecoming, while *White Teeth* embraces ambiguity in multicultural society. *Americanah* is centered on Ifemelu and her individual character-focused ending while *White Teeth* focuses on multicultural interconnectedness. *Americanah* ends with an explicit return to Nigerian identity, whereas *White Teeth* ends with an open-ended and celebratory tone of multicultural unity.

Americanah ends with a more romantic narrative resolution of two childhood lovers Ifemelu and Obinze, while *White Teeth* ends with resolution of family conflicts and acceptance of different cultural perspectives. In *Americanah*, the end emphasizes themes of belonging, complexity of transnational experiences ultimately celebrating a return to roots and personal authenticity. The novel, *White Teeth*, ends with the celebration of mutual understanding across cultural boundaries, with a sense of hope and continuation of transformation.

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