



Maids and Mistresses: Negotiating the Journey of Similarity, Appeasement and Cultural Complexity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation*

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a vivid portrayal of Nigerian women and the cultural complexities they face, as a result of their displacement from their motherland to chase the American dream. Nkem's challenge as a woman stuck in the conflicting zones of living a prosperous American life and bearing the stings of infidelity of her husband who lives in Lagos is ultimately solved when she decides to return back to her roots, sacrificing the American Dream. Her final decision not to be appeasing to her husband Obiora or to her temporary place in Philadelphia where she and her house-help Amaechi stand at the same pedestal is the crux of this paper. This paper explores the alienation of Nkem creating a new identity as a Nigerian in America with all amenities that aid her classy life style but leaves her with no companionship, respect or sense of belongingness in the alien land. The paper also scrutinises the similarity in the status of both the mistress Nkem and the maid Amaechi irrespective of the difference in their economic status. The protagonist Nkem, despite being the mistress of the lavish house that her husband Obiora owns in Philadelphia finds herself in the same shoes as her maid Amaechi. The similarity of vulnerability between Nkem and Amaechi and their keenness to appease Obiora to remain a part of the American affluent society is the focal point of this paper.

Keywords: Alienation, Appeasement, Displacement, Maids, Mistresses, Similarity.

Introduction

One of the earliest studies in the cultural complexities of the indigenous people of Africa has been a manifestation of their displacement and years of enslavement compounded with the fact that black has always been looked down upon as not only the "other" but also as uncivilised, bestial and primitive. Black American intellectuals such as Fredric Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Paul Gilroy and many others endeavoured to create awareness regarding the rights of the blacks and foreground the racial and imperialistic designs and its effects on the marginalised. The sustained discrimination and enslavement gave birth to black studies with the aid of several theorists, writers and social activists who tirelessly strived to spread the black consciousness movement across the globe. Despite the slave trade being outlawed by the European powers in the early part of the nineteenth century the colonial ethos continues. The Nigerian women are doubly marginalised not only due to imperialistic demeanour but also due to the existing patriarchal norms. Gloria Jean Watkins, popularly known as bell hooks, one of the prominent social activist, writer and lead feminist says in her pioneering book *Ain't I a Woman?* -

"The African woman schooled in the art of obedience to a higher authority by the tradition of her society was probably seen by the white male slaver as an ideal subject for slavery (pg 17)"

(Walker, 2002) in her article titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South (1974)* poignantly states how women give up on their dreams, creativity and aesthetics just because they are not counted as individuals at all. In this soul stirring article, a must read for all women she muses on the countless women –our mothers, grandmothers, who despite being very talented and capable led a life of utter neglect, disdain and penury catering to the needs of their family, children, husbands, keeping her own needs, creativity and desires as the least of all priorities. They work all through the day without their labour being accounted for.

“Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the mule of the world,"(pg 4.)

It is no denying the fact that black women are doubly marginalised and this paper is focussed to describe how black identity needs to be globalised and attention be drawn to the ongoing disparity towards the blacks. Women writers such as Octavia Butler, Nikki Giovanni, Yaa Gyasi, Samantha Irby, Anne Moody, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison have portrayed vividly the discrimination meted out to the black women on account of their complexion, hair meekness and vulnerability. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one such writer who has painted the black woman in all her stark reality. Her women characters strive for an independent status in the alien land of America where they yearn for companionship and recognition. Her story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a collection of twelve stories that depict Nigerian women struggling for a foothold in the American society where their status as an immigrant is all they have. This paper explores two of Adichie's characters Nkem and Amaechi from her story “Imitation” and argues that Adichie's portrayal of the mistress Nkem and the Maid Amaechi is an effort to coalesce their status and portray them as women conditioned to appease Obiora, Nkem's husband and America their country of dreams.

Methodology

A close scrutiny of the primary text that is Adichie's “Imitation” and the secondary texts that involve research on her writing, the history of exploitation of black women and different facets of the story is done with an aim to use textual and content analysis as the methodology of the study. A background of Postcolonial theory has been helpful to understand the concepts of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence. A keen understanding of the migration theory and the theory of similarity have strengthened the study.

Literature Review

(Widyaningrum, 2018) derives that white people are often described as noble, peace loving civilised and sophisticated in contrast to blacks who are degraded as unclean and uncivilised. On researching about the plight of black maids as described in Katheryn Stockett's *The Help*, the researcher deduces that black maids are treated differently just because they are dark-skinned.

(Anghel, 2021) studies the stereotypical presentation of women as submissive and tolerant and not recognising them as complete individuals. She affirms the stories of immigrants' enthusiasm in leading a prosperous dream like life in America deserting Nigeria for an American life of opulence. Years of struggle and poverty stricken lives drive Nigerian immigrants to migrate to America with the hope and aspiration for a dignified living.

(Oseghale, 2019) explores Homi K. Bhabha's theory of Mimicry in analysing the characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story *Americanah* and the employment of mimicry as survival strategies by the immigrants. The American way of life is quickly adapted to and it gets very much into the everyday life of the immigrants until they start mimicking the American life style and are proud to adopt the American culture. The researcher also raises the research questions as to how the protagonist fights racial discrimination in America.

Black feminism that constitutes the dynamism of cultural, social and economic changes is represented in many researches in this domain. (Palapala, 2018) reinstates the belittling experiences of immigrant women in an alien country. (Pite, 2018) explores the maid mistress relationship in Argentine fiction and states that several writers have depicted the maid as subservient and too obliged to her mistress, ready to sacrifice her personal life for her in return of which the mistress restrains herself from being too familiar with the maid. (Madi, 2021)

in their research paper on Adichie stress on the aspects of equality to humans irrespective of considerations of race or sex.

(Uwabideli, 2019) quotes Adichie describing “the single story” as the story told only from the perspective of the influential and not from the perspective of the marginalised. She concludes that almost all the problems of black women stem from the stereotypical representations of the race. (Ruth Issack, 2021) describe how identities are not always self- defined and reiterate Adichie’s belief that a new Nigeria will emerge soon overcoming all the sufferings.

America – The Dream Place

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is renowned in the world of literature for representing African women their double marginalisation and their stereotypical portrayal as submissive and docile women. At the same time she portrays the plight of the women immigrants their feeling of alienation in a foreign land and their turmoil as they are in a dilemma whether to stay back in a land that offers them the golden dream of wealth, luxury and status or go back to the country that has been theirs since birth. The protagonist Nkem in Adichie’s “Imitation” is married to a wealthy Nigerian Obiora who owns a palatial house in Philadelphia but stays in Lagos to join Nkem only for two months ever year. Nkem is happy to live the royal life in America enjoying the luxury of her children studying in schools where white children go, and the ambience of a rich locality. She is only too proud to tell her friends back home about the affluence she is surrounded with.

“She sent them pictures of herself and Obiora near the Liberty Bell, proudly scrawled very important in American history behind the pictures, and enclosed glossy pamphlets featuring a balding Benjamin Franklin.”(pg.19)

Nkem is pleased to flaunt her life style, one which she had never dreamt of and one which was now very much a part of her, as any native American. She is proud to be married to Obiora one who can afford all the ways of the American dream world. She tries to behave the American way, tries to gain proximity of their rich neighbours.

“She did not mind that her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless to them. She liked them and their lives. Lives Obiora often called “plastic.” Yet she knew he, too, wanted the children to be like their neighbors’ ...” (pg.19)

She doesn’t mind that she often questioned about Obiora’s absence, the occasional taunts of the neighbours or even their prying eyes ready to discover all her secrets.

Lagos and Nostalgia

Even when Nkem basks in the glory of her American dream, her nostalgia for her home back in Nigeria gnaws at her. She and Obiora love collecting the Nigerian cultural relics in the form of masks that are considered very precious. Obiora cannot afford the original masks but each time he visits Nkem he brings home imitations of the original African masks. These masks remind Nkem of home, of her childhood and she listens to Obiora intently when he describes how the British carried home the original African masks in large numbers.

“She does miss home, though, her friends, the cadence of Igbo and Yoruba and pidgin English spoken around her. And when the snow covers the yellow fire hydrant on the street, she misses the Lagos sun that glares down even when it rains.” (pg. 27)

Adichie describes Nkem as a woman who is quick to adapt to a lifestyle that she knows she has to live in. Though from an impoverished background, Nkem adapts quickly to America, settling down with her children, dropping and picking them from school, enjoying the cool, calm fresh interiors of her large, comfortable home yet she has a nudging nostalgia inside her for her hometown and those memories pull her to her roots.

Alienation, Appeasement and Mimicry

The fact that Nkem gets to meet Obiora only during the two summer months makes her feel alone and alienated in the foreign land that she so strives to call her own. She reminiscences meeting a Nigerian woman she had

met at a wedding who too like her had a husband who worked in Nigeria and came to meet her once in a blue moon.

“Our men like to keep us here, she had told Nkem. They visit for business and vacations, they leave us and the children with big houses and cars, they get us housegirls from Nigeria who we don’t have to pay any outrageous American wages, and they say business is better in Nigeria and all that. But you know why they won’t move here, even if business were better here? Because America does not recognize Big Men. Nobody says “Sir! Sir!” to them in America. Nobody rushes to dust their seats before they sit down. (pg.21)

The fact that even rich black men are not recognised in America explains the permanent immigrant status. Despite the alienation women do not want to go back to Nigeria because of their aspiration for a life that is dream like in the posh colonies of America. The women though lonely get used to the affluence and do not mind their status as a second class citizen nor the discriminatory behaviour. Adichie’s portrayal of Nkem as a woman who came from an impoverished background to rise to the status where she is valued and can live a life of comfort is poignant and touching. Nkem’s inner turmoil as a woman who faced severe hardship during her childhood is described by Adichie to bring before the readers the fact that migration often is associated with economic reasons and women are the worst sufferers.

The Maid Mistress Connect

Under such prevailing circumstances the only one who stays connected to Nkem is Amaechi, her maid who has been a constant companion, help and confidante in the most troublesome and turbulent times. She is brought into Nkem’s household by Obiora when is in her teens and Nkem is very pleased with her efficiency. They mutually connect over their cultural past and Nkem doesn’t forget her days spent in penury. They think alike in many ways and share a bond with their past.

“Back home, she would have used yams for the ji akwukwo pottage, but here there are hardly any yams at the African store—real African yams, not the fibrous potatoes the American supermarkets sell as yams. Imitation yams, Nkem thinks, and smiles. She has never told Amaechi how similar their childhoods were.”(pg24)

Nkem wonders if she too is leading a life of imitation-of imitating the American culture just to be a part of it. When Nkem gets to understand that Obiora is having an affair back at Lagos and has brought in his girlfriend to stay at her place, she is devastated. She turns rebellious and does all that Obiora doesn’t like her to do. She cuts off her hair and stops trimming her pubic hair. This act of her defiance to standard notions of beauty, frees her from the bondage of submissiveness and appeasement. She is no longer willing to appease Obiora for the money he spends on her and her children. To vent out her inner turmoil she decides to confide in Amaechi because she feels-

“The madam/house girl line has blurred in the years she has had Amaechi. It is what America does to you, she thinks. It forces egalitarianism on you. You have nobody to talk to, really, except for your toddlers, so you turn to your house girl. And before you know it, she is your friend.Your equal.”(pg.22)

Nkem understands that Amaechi stands at the same pedestal with her having faced common hardship and cultural contexts. She finds she views Obiora in almost similar pattern as Amaechi. Both are eager to appease him. They never discuss his behaviour or conduct but are focussed more towards the appeasement of his everyday wants and desires.

“But they have never talked about Obiora except to discuss what he will eat, or how to launder his shirts, when he visits.” (pg.24)

For the first time Nkem shares with Amaechi the fact of Obiora’s infidelity and is surprised by her reaction. Amaechi always knew of Obiora’s wayward ways and shows Nkem the mirror that she avoided till now.

“But madam, you know, too.” “I know? I know what?” “You know oga Obiora has girlfriends. You don’t ask questions. But inside, you know.”(pg.25)

Nkem finds herself at the same plane with Amaechi She gets a jolt to understand that she too like Amaechi does not have the right to ask questions. Despite knowing the fact that Obiora has been deceiving her, she feigns happiness and cannot question him .This puts her at the same plane with Amaechi and the difference in status of the maid and mistress is nullified.

“Do you want a small drink?” Amaechi asks, watching her, and Nkem wonders if it is pity, that liquid glint in Amaechi’s slightly slanted eyes. A small drink has been their tradition, hers and Amaechi’s, for some years now, since the day Nkem got her green card. She had opened a bottle of champagne that day and poured for Amaechi and herself, after the children went to bed. “To America!” she’d said, amid Amaechi’s too loud laughter.”(pg.26)

After she confides in Amaechi, Amaechi almost commands her to forget what Obiora has done. She also advises her not to believe in what people say of Obiora .Her advise motherly by nature is much solicited by Nkem. This blurs the distinction between the maid and the mistress

“You will forgive him, madam. Men are like that.”(pg.25)

Her command like advice sets Nkem thinking. Should she live forever in America and let Obiora stay with his girlfriend in her house? She is at crossroads because she cannot leave the life that she has been leading in America.

“America has grown on her, snaked its roots under her skin.” (pg.27)

Conclusion

After she listens to Amaechi that she may ultimately have to forgive Obiora, Nkem decides not to live an imitation life any more. She realises her American life is not worth giving up on her family and husband. So when Obiora visits her, she makes up her mind to shift back to Lagos and tells him so. Nkem’s life of imitation comes to an end and she ultimately returns back to her roots. Amaechi the maid has an instrumental role to play in her decision of returning back to Nigeria. The fact that the maid and mistress face similar circumstances and background leads to a mutual understanding of the reasons and implications of Obiora’s infidelity propelling Nkem to take a decision to end her life of imitation in a country where she lives a life of appeasement.

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