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### A Fictional Depiction of the Peculiarities of the African Female Gender Experiences in the Diaspora

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The issue of Africans in the Diaspora stretches historically to the time when Africa began having contact with the outside world, particularly the Arabs, Chinese, Turks, and others. Beginning with the 16th to the 18th C, the contacts heightened during the Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade. Thereafter, Africans have found themselves in the Diaspora for many reasons. This has elicited a myriad of reactions to their experiences in the Diaspora. Therefore, the study sought to investigate the fictional depiction of African immigrant experiences in the Diaspora. It was guided by two objectives namely: to establish the fictional depiction of the peculiarities of the African female experiences in the Diaspora, and to investigate the narrative styles adopted to convey these experiences. The focus was on four novels: *Americanah* (2013), *Minaret* (2005), *We Need New Names* (2013), and *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo* (1986). The study was library-based research. Its significance is in the fact that it gives a snapshot of the two sides of migration- positive and negative. The results revealed that the African female gender faces indescribable discrimination, undergoes the pain of assimilation into the foreign culture, has to work two jobs in order to sustain life in the Diaspora, is always haunted by the fear of aging and having nothing to show for it, plus several other challenges. The diasporic spaces also catalyse character changes in these migrants. As a result, they adopt confusing mannerisms, fail to wish away homesickness, become two-faced hypocrites, are subdued, submissive and in extreme cases – go through a mental breakdown. It was discovered that migrant fiction is narrated through humour, flashback, irony, detailed description, suspense and other stylistic techniques. The study concluded that migration is now a contemporary and central theme in much of African fiction, especially by a new generation of African writers.

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## INTRODUCTION

As earlier noted, the historical evolution of the African Diaspora in the world straddles three identifiable periods. The Arab trade in African slaves was followed by forced African migrations during the Transatlantic Slave Trade (16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Century). Europeans captured or bought African slaves and brought them to Europe and later on to South and North America. Omeje (2007) argues that this population movement can be considered as the migration that paved the way for the constitution of the first African community outside Africa. Many Africans were exported out of Africa during this period but the feeling of belonging to a community did not disappear. It instead became stronger, in a way. Despite gains of independence, economic and cultural ties remained strong between the former colonies and the erstwhile colonizers. Many people willingly left the African continent in search of better working or educational opportunities in Europe and North America. This category of Diaspora is mainly the product of 'voluntary migration'. Starting from the 1980s, the most common grounds on which the Africans left their countries changed in nature. Fleeing from broken and fragile states, wars, hapless poverty or political persecution became major causes of emigration, up until today. This wave of African emigration has influenced all aspects of societies, and the sociological profiles of the migrants are very diverse – Africans of all hierarchies, occupations and age groups are involved. Palmer (2000) observes that this contemporary Diaspora tend in general, to keep more connections to their country of origin, with various ways of relating.

As a result, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, migration became one of the major forces shaping cultures,

economies and politics of the world. This recognition led to the starting up of the International Organisation for Migration in order to understand and manage opportunities and challenges arising from this new phenomenon. Or perhaps the phenomenon was not so new: but its importance had not been understood or recognised. This has led to some countries such as United Kingdom, Canada and France, openly declaring themselves to be multicultural. Germany is struggling with the problem while countries like Japan and Russia are secretly trying to resist this force and keep their societies monocular (Higgins, 2012). However, the attainment of this new status has been far from easy, particularly for women with numerous immigrants going through harrowing experiences. It is against this background that this study sought to depict a fictional depiction of peculiarities African women in Diaspora with a focus on the four novels namely: *Americanah* (2013), *Minaret* (2006), *We Need New Names* (2013) and *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo* (1986).

## Statement of the Problem

As much as there have been several works on Immigrant experiences such as those of Chimamanda Ngozi, NoViolet Bulawayo, Leila Aboulela and John Nagenda, there has been a missing gap that this study sought to fill particularly in the critical reception of the four novels in their depiction of African female immigrant experiences in the Diaspora. Furthermore, there has been scanty research that has made a comparative study of the literary presentation of migration trials and tribulations from an African perspective. Besides, there is an over-reliance on a section of the media that only focuses on the depiction in the form of pop

culture, social media, television and cinema. Such a depiction portrays life in the Diaspora as a panacea for all of Africa's problems. As a result of this, the Western world enjoys a positive portrayal while Africa is associated with misery, war, hunger and other forms of denigration. Therefore, an objective analysis of immigrant experiences was needed and hence this study sought to present the objective analysis.

### Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by two objectives namely:

- To establish the fictional depictions of the peculiarities of the African female gender experiences in the Diaspora from four novels: *Americanah* (2013), *Minaret* (2006), *We Need New Names* (2013) and *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo* (1986)
- To explore the narrative styles that these four authors adopt to convey these experiences.

### Research Question

What are the fictional depictions of the peculiarities of the African female gender experiences in the diaspora and which narrative styles do the four authors adopt to convey these experiences?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chimamanda's *Americanah* (2013), a young Nigerian woman-Ifemelu immigrates to the United States to attend university. This decision is premised on the assumption that her motherland does not offer her many opportunities for a bright future. Her thirteen years' stay in America is punctuated with some successes, such as her attainment of education and authoring a well-received blog entitled '*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks* (Those formerly known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black'.

However, the downside of her stay in the Diaspora is also noticeable. She struggles with cultural deviations, deprivation, racial discrimination, loneliness, the tension between class and race, indecision on whether to relax her hair or keep an

afro and the never-ending clash between white Americans and Nigerian immigrants, between Africans and African Americans, between the light and dark-skinned, between the new and established immigrants.

The situation is not any different in Zimbabwe, as depicted in No Violet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), which is also mainly an immigration novel. From childhood struggles, pain and deprivation (a razed family home, an HIV-infected father), Darling and her age mates hope for a much better life in the Diaspora-America to be specific. The life in makeshift buildings, chaos, death, threats of violence, a bleak future, hunger and other diseases; make both the children and adults devoid of any traces of patriotism. A life in the diaspora portends a better option.

It is against this background that Darling travels to America to start a new life with her aunt, who lives in Detroit. She is highly expectant of a much better and gratifying life. However, new revelations and unexpected discoveries await her. The life of an immigrant comes with a barrage of challenges: adapting to a new culture proves to be challenging, the threat of deportation is ever present, the American culture is not a paradise, and there is too much snow that covers everything like sand; until Darling concludes that "it is terrible being black in a new land".

The cultural divide and its complexities remain. Darling fails to get over the comparison of "what is now and what was then", her new friends are too modern (they prefer their technological gadgets to human company) and her diaspora livelihood is stressful in very many ways. She experiences life's pain because of her lack of experience in the new world. The experiences of Thomas Tebo in John Nagenda's *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo* (1986) are not any different from the aforementioned immigrant challenges. This novel also describes the pains of life in exile. Tebo and his fellow exiles suffer discrimination, are overwhelmed by homesickness and lack solid identity. However, some of their actions indicate

that they can play a big role in shaping the destiny and governance of their homelands.

The discourse of African Diaspora experiences has been theorized by scholars such as Salman Rushdie (1982), Edward Said (1984), Avitah Brah (1996), James Clifford (1994), among many others. In all these writings, it is clear that the diaspora dispersion brings forth a longing and bittersweet yearning for home. This is largely due to the lack of unconditional acceptance in the host countries.

Kenny (2013) merges historical undertones with the current diaspora status when he observes that the five centuries of distinctive experience cannot be without some underlying meaning, some redeeming force, the very principle of identity that may be called freedom of the soul. He asserts that it was in slavery that the Diaspora was born, together with the longing and struggle for freedom and concludes that it still has to free itself. Only then can the black Diaspora proceed to a great purpose, for which its history has prepared it. This author encourages the diasporas to speak not only for their own freedom but for the cause of freedom itself, against those who, in the name of the state, the nation, the race, this god or that god, would deny it (pp: 439 – 440).

The African–American migration experience serves as a microcosm that reflects the still underrated role of the African communities in the Diaspora. The New York Public Library (2005) confirms that new societies, new peoples and new communities usually originate in acts of migration. Someone or a group of people decides to move from one place to another, where they set up a new home and sever their ties with their traditional society as they set out in search of new opportunities, new challenges, new lives and new worlds.

Most societies in human history have a migration narrative in their stories of origin. This is the reason America is, after all, a “nation of immigrants”. Yet, until recently, people of African descent have not been counted as part of America’s migratory tradition. The trans-Atlantic

slave trade has created an enduring image of black men and women as transported commodities and is usually considered the most defining element in the construction of the African Diaspora, but it is centuries of additional movements that have given shape to the nation we know today. This is the story that has not been told.

However, on a more positive note, the above narrative of the African–American migration experience also presents the other side of the Diaspora: one that focuses on the self–motivated activities of peoples of African descent to remake themselves and their worlds. It presents voluntary movements of resourceful and creative men and women, risk-takers in an exploitative and hostile environment. Their survival skills, efficient networks and dynamic culture, enabled them to thrive, spread and be at the very core of the settlement and development of the Americas. It is significant to note that their hopeful journeys changed not only their world and the fabric of the African Diaspora but also the western hemisphere (Zezeza, 2009). In addition, the cultures of black migrants from the south, the Caribbean, Haiti and Africa; have had an extraordinary impact on American arts and culture. It is all the more unfortunate, that such a diasporic contribution is neither appreciated nor recognized.

Uzodinma (2013) suggests that Darling’s contact with ‘Destroyed Michigan’ brings to the fore the worst of American youth culture. The downside of immigrant life is exposed through the narrator’s trite observations about the oddness of snow, the sound of gunshots and the clash of cultures, when a skinny Zimbabwean marries a grossly fat American in order to get immigration papers. Here, there is a predictable pride - meets - privilege show down when Darling encounters the anorexic daughter of a man whose house she cleans. The text enhances the uneasiness that accompanies a newcomer’s arrival in a foreign land. It also illuminates how the reinvention of the self in a new place confronts the protective memory of the way things were back home.

It is this confrontation that further complicates the lives of the African immigrants:



*In We Need New Names, NoViolet Bulawayo has written an anguished and angry tale of the African Diaspora. The question it asks is not why things fall apart, but what the costs of fleeing are when it does (Habila, 2013).*

In this new land, there is food aplenty, something that cannot be said of the situation back home. Now, spared the struggle of daily survival, Darling must reinvent herself as an American teenager – making new friends, bagging groceries in a supermarket, discovering the internet and facing the realization that not all of her dreams will come true.

In the end, the protagonist realizes that although it is now all that she has, America can never be home. For Darling, a girl now on the verge of womanhood, an illegal immigrant, America is a land to be endured. Yet, endurance is the last thing on the mind of an African immigrant hoping to live a life of glamour in the Western world (Allfrey, 2013). Even though Darling feels like America is her country because her aunt Fostalina lives there, she finds herself displaced when she gets there. Her isolation and loss are distinctly presented as she shares her experiences.

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) is considered a text that successfully combines a tale of inexperience and cultural confusion, with an insider's view of the conflicts and complexities within the immigrant and Muslim communities. It is a simple and clearly written story that takes a different look at the tensions within Islam, between men and women, and life as an immigrant.

Rich (2014) credits *Minaret* for being as much a novel as it is a discourse on modern society. In reading it, we all have a much better understanding of Islam than before. Much as the novel is a description of life as a Sudanese woman struggling to make a living in London, *Minaret* is also largely a morality tale:

*Aboulela paints a fascinating picture of intercultural strife. Anwar, the atheist communist, despises Western ways. Tamer, the devout Muslim has no sympathy for anti-*

*Americanism and is not at all political. Prejudice abounds, from the white racist thugs who douse Najwa with beer to the gentle Tamer who cannot stand an atheist. Tolerance it seems, is in short supply (p. 45).*

The combination of the above diversity is what makes *Minaret* a topical text.

Leila Aboulela writes about the pain of exile. The narrator keeps her eyes downcast, aiming to become a silent, invisible figure, moving in the background of her employers' lives. Kuman (2005) observes that this text is suffused with an acute sense of alienation. It is the detachment from close human bonds that initially impels Najwa to seek sanctuary in religion. The narrator struggles to find a foothold in an unstable world and this illustrates the portrayal of how rapidly the ground beneath one's feet can slip away. When Najwa is converted into a maid, a humble appendage to a series of Arab families, she journeys from pride and confusion to humility and peace. All the literature reviewed portends that the African migration experience does not bear much benefit. This is the gap that the researcher has attempted to fill by objectively analysing the pros and cons of the concept of immigration, using fictional writing, which most of the literature reviewed has not focused on.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data was used to provide an in-depth analysis of the study variables using content analysis. This involved developing themes and sub-themes in line with the study objectives. In addition to Diaspora sample texts, several post-colonial theories were also reviewed in order to fit the study into the relevant theoretical framework. The works of previous scholars were also alluded to in order to tap into the comparative notions of this immigration issue. This document analysis enriched the study with the relevant data.

At the same time, the study employed different sources of documentation evidence ranging from official documents issued by the government and those obtained from recognized institutions. Similarly, Babikwa (2003) classified different sources of documentary evidence to include:

letters and administrative or any other documents. The implication is that there are different sources of documents that can provide data. For purposes of this study, several such documents were reviewed, including national policy on immigration, remittance files, migrant profiles and several others. Electronic sources, journals, Google Scholar and other theses were also interacted with, to trace and establish immigrant experiences in the Diaspora. This information was used as both primary and secondary data in the thesis.

The study used purposive sampling which was based on these four works of fiction as the primary texts: Ngonzi Adichie Chimamanda's *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Leila ABoulela's *Minaret* (2006) and John Nagenda's *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo* (1986). The study mainly followed the qualitative approach. The source of data was mainly textual/documental but there were also quality control measures employed to ensure reliability and validity. This non-numerical study was carried out under objectives' guided sub-headings. The analysis included content examination and establishment of the connection to the research objectives and questions. The immigrant experiences in the data collected were focused on as the guidelines for meeting the expectations of this study. The procedure of the study was thus data processing and subsequently, data analysis. In some instances, sections of the texts were transcribed but the researcher ensured that the key message of the author was maintained. Some of the characters in *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* use pidgin English. This necessitated the researcher to translate the message therein.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### The Peculiarities of the African Female Experiences in the Diaspora

*"Roles should be based on ability, not on the Reproductive organs you were born with."*  
Chimamanda Ngozi, 'Academic One File', 14<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

During the course of the investigation, the researcher discovered the need to pay attention to the special circumstances of women and decided that there was a need to focus on them in particular, having realized that they encountered a unique experience of being subjected to double patriarchy. Koskei (2015) calls it "women being oppressed twice over by patriarchy and an imperial society which boxes them within the triple issue of gender, race and class."

In Chimamanda's *Americanah*, one realizes that as far as women in the Diaspora are concerned, there is no definite path to follow and there are no guarantees. While some are able to maximize the few avenues of opportunities, others (such as the salonist girl) do not seem to have much of a bright future.

Just like the male gender, African women in the diaspora have to grapple with indescribable racial discrimination. For example, Ifemelu becomes nameless, only a colour, a generic type, merely a coloured woman, no longer herself but more of a thing. Frustrated, she comments:

*I came from a country where race was not an issue. I did not think of myself as black when I came to America...* (Chimamanda, 2014, p. 187)

Although she partly succeeds in making it in the Diaspora and even brings her parents to visit her, Ifemelu's journey cannot be described as having been hustle-free.

Women either succumb to or outrightly resist the discrimination agenda. Koskei (2015) supports this view by alluding to the feminist perspective which advocates for the need to free women from all forms of gender discrimination and oppression. Ifemelu attains both. She keeps her African identity while at the same time trying to fit into the white man's system.

African women in the Diaspora tend to be confined to the lowest-paying jobs which are menial in nature. They mostly work as domestic servants, cooks, and waitresses and carry out other unconventional services in private homes. Reddock (2007) sums up this anomaly by

observing that the variables of race, gender and class, further complicate the lives of women of colour and more specifically the lives of African immigrant women. They receive lower salaries and are more likely to be located in lower-status service occupations.

The experiences of the characters in *Americanah* are not far detached from what the female characters in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, undergo. Aunt Fostalina knows that in order to fit into the Diaspora community, she has to struggle with weight loss woes so that she can look like the white models. This is an uphill task, but she goes about it with commendable zeal. Her commitment to this exercise is an outward expression of an inner need for acceptance in her new home. The fact that her husband is not very keen on this exercise shows that gender differences abound even in the Diaspora:

*Uncle Kojo looks at Aunt Fostalina walking in one place and folds his arms saying... I actually don't understand why you are doing all this. Look at you, bones bones bones. They are not even African those women you are looking like. There is nothing African about a woman with no thighs, no hips, no belly, no behind* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 152).

However, Aunt Fostalina refuses to be fazed by the objections and instead cries out for assurance that her desire for a slimmer body will soon be fulfilled. "Do you think I am losing weight? Who is fatter, me or Aunt Da? Who is fatter, me or your mother?" These are questions from a woman whose resolve to change her body shape is steadfast. Women like her are ready to go all the way in order to adapt to the structure, systems and styles of what they now call 'home'.

The women in the Diaspora work twice as hard as the male gender and make very many sacrifices so as to keep the extended family back home comfortable, by sending them remittances. They push themselves to the last iota of strength in order to look after the families on both sides of the Atlantic. Darling shares this observation:

*Aunt Fostalina doesn't have energy since she is so busy with her two jobs. The reason she is*

*working hard like this is so she can finish paying for the house she just bought for her mother and the mother of Bones in Budapest. I have seen the pictures; it is a nice big house with a pool... The house is even nicer than the one we live in here in America, which I find strange...* (Ibid, p. 189).

African female immigrants are generally discriminated against but more so the moslem women who have to endure all sorts of misconceptions. When Darling and her friends see a woman in a black hijab, they cannot help remembering the things seen on T.V. They conclude that if she were wearing jeans or something else, they wouldn't even look at her twice over. In essence, the moslem African woman faces a double tragedy in the Diaspora. The bias against moslems is combined with segregation against the women, to make her life unbearable.

Just like Ifemelu sleeps with white men in order to get some material benefits, so does Aunt Fostalina, who has an affair with Eliot. This is meant to increase their financial comfort in the Diaspora. These women have traded their virtues for survival.

When the initial stubbornness wears off, women in the Diaspora become homemakers. Aunt Fostalina now cooks for Uncle Kojo. When he arrives home, she gets up from the couch and goes to the kitchen, where she has rice, beans and fish waiting. She even goes online and gets recipes from her husband's home country because it is the only food she can get him to eat. This character reform is a welcome development.

Yet, for all they plan and do, the African women in the Diaspora live through the fear of aging and having nothing to show for it. Darling forecasts thus:

*Then I'm seeing myself, bent over a bottle cart. My face, wrinkled with age, is now shaped like a can of pop and my head is a lump of snow. I have to drag myself to the can boxes because I am so old, I cannot throw anymore* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 256).

The fear of passing on in a foreign land keeps gnawing at their hearts, causing them a lot of anxiety. These and several other experiences described in this novel make *We Need New Names* a powerful depiction of female challenges in the Diaspora.

The female gender in John Nagenda's *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo* also faces difficult times as African women in the diaspora, which they largely find depressing. They do odd jobs such as when Hilda joins a rebel group, where she does daring and risky jobs. Sometimes, these women are not left with much of a choice but rather to do what they otherwise would not have imagined, had a different choice availed itself.

One of the coping mechanisms of the African female gender experiences in the diaspora is the scheme to acquire a new identity. Najwa attempts to shed off the old skin by categorically denying who she is. When asked about her origins, she responds:

*My heart starts to pound as it always does when there is the threat that someone will know who I am, who I was, and what I have become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali (Aboulela, 2006, p. 71)?*

This adaptation is meant to give them a fresh start in their new life. The sense of a new beginning covers up the hollowness of a lost identity. For Najwa, this is an attempt to hide her identity because of her father's crimes.

Yet, not even this newly acquired identity can erase the feeling of being stunted as these African female migrants turn into all-agreeing beings and very well fit into or rather naturally, take on the servant role. Najwa's first day at work as a maid reveals this concept:

*...as if, I am invisible. It takes me by surprise how natural I am in this servant role. All the ingratiating manners, the downcast eyes, the sideway movements... (Ibid, p. 83).*

The low status of these African women migrants tempts them to wish that their lives were better. They are always fighting not to be envious of

more successful women. Having to play the servant role for a woman whose life she could easily have, had it not been for the accident of birth, gets Najwa very emotional, disillusioned and subdued:

*She asks me lots of questions, inspects the dinner I cooked, lifting up saucepan lids. She seems impressed, her heavy features alive. Is this how a young affluent woman feels, fulfilled in her work, coming home to a young child? I owe myself an absence of envy; I owe myself a heart free of grudges (Aboulela, 2006, p. 73).*

To be envious of another's fortunes is natural but because of the width of the class divide in this particular set-up, Najwa's feelings seem to take a turn for the worse as they threaten to evolve into a deep grudge.

This envy also leads to the analysis of the difference in behaviour and attitude, between the immigrants and those that were born in the host countries. The protagonist confesses to the fact that usually, the young moslem girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle her though she admires them. She says that she always finds herself trying to understand them. They have individuality and an outspokenness she didn't have when she was their age. Najwa however consoles herself by realizing that they lack the preciousness and glamour that the girls in Khartoum had. This comparison also shows that female immigrants receive substantial satisfaction from reminiscing on the good old days. However, nostalgia for the life once lived can also be very discouraging to the immigrants. Najwa is very glad that her father, Baba, did not live to see what happens to Omar or even herself. She works as a maid; something considered a very low-status profession and Omar turns into a helpless drug addict.

There are two categories of women depicted in *Minaret*. The type of Zeinab who do not pay much attention to the negativity around them while Najwa and company are very cautious. Lamya symbolizes the category whose shortcomings are very disappointing. She is not religious, is a lousy



mother and a negative sister, rebellious and generally badly mannered. It is up to the African female immigrant to choose the lifestyle mode that best suits her interests.

The sexual assault that Najwa suffers when Kamal rubs himself on her is one of the several ways in which women are exploited, both in the diaspora and home countries. Matters are made worse when the person supposed to defend her, trivializes the whole incident. “You are sophisticated enough to deal with this, Najwa. Don’t make a big thing out of it. Be flexible with him, the poor guy has lots of hang-ups,” Anwar replies to Najwa’s complaint. Such a response smacks of degradation of women because sexual assault should be condemned, in spite of its presentation and style. It is just like the humiliation that Najwa encounters when Lamya considers her beneath her social status and unworthy of falling in love with her brother Tamer. When she slaps her after finding them kissing, the low status of Najwa in the eyes of the established middle class, is confirmed.

In the final analysis, it has been established that African women in the Diaspora, as depicted in several fictional characters, face very many challenges that can only be ameliorated by identifying the few available opportunities and maximally utilizing them to uplift their social, economic and other status.

### **The Narrative Styles Used by the Authors to Convey the Immigrant Experiences**

The four authors are original voices who have conveyed a powerful message by being inventive in their craftsmanship. They employ several narrative styles to expose the trials and tribulations of the Africans in the Diaspora. It is this ample usage of styles that makes their tales unforgettable.

In *Americanah*, Ngozi Chimamanda uses sarcasm right from the title to other aspects of the narrative. The titular *Americanah* is itself a part of the Nigerian lexicon, an appellation denoting one who has been to America. It marks an ontological discontinuity: the *Americanah* is both Nigerian

and not, both African and not, both American and not. *Americanah* recalls the violence of forced belonging and the continual rootlessness of unbelonging (Orem, 2013).

The humour in the narrative abounds in virtually every chapter of *Americanah*. This amusingness is pregnant with sarcastic undertones and satirical melodrama. Yakuba (2017) observes that African students from Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and other African countries usually commune together and laugh at American systems and people. They mimic what Americans tell or ask them about Africans. This reveals to the reader that these black characters are not actually divorced from their African culture and tradition. They still hold it high despite being surrounded by the white mainstream culture.

The pain of migrant life is overspiced by the author’s continued application of humour, which makes the absurd realities of life bearable, such as in the scenario below:

*I Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How To. Fill. These. Out?* (Chimamanda, 2013, p. 133).

The above passage is a comic but belittling expression by an American official to show that Africans neither speak nor understand English which is considered to be a higher-class language. The official thus feels obliged to break the sentence into singular syllables lest the African migrant fails to understand a thing.

When Ifemelu’s pious mother prays that the road be covered with the blood of Jesus, her father responds that they would be safer, less slippery, if not covered with blood. Ifemelu muses at the prospect of her jobless father calling his boss “mummy”. While spending time at Obinze’s home, and enjoying baking with his mother, Ifemelu remembers that their own oven housed cockroaches instead. When Auntie Uju visits a Lagos salon, while still the girlfriend of a powerful army general, the hairdressers hover and grovel, curtsy deeply as they overpraise her handbag and shoes. Ifemelu watches, fascinated. It is here that the different ranks of imperial

femaleness are best understood. Ifemelu cannot help observing:

*Those girls, I was waiting for them to bring out their hands and beg you to shit so they could worship that too* (Ibid, p. 77).

Humour is expressed in several other passages. When the army general impregnates Auntie Uju, she reveals that he is happy to know that he can still score a goal at his age, an old man like him! When Dike is born, his father's self-denigration is amusing. He says, "he looks like me but thank God he took his mother's teeth." When Ifemelu dances for Obinze in her underwear, wiggling her hips, he teases her about having a small bottom, to which she responds, "I was going to say shake it, but there is nothing to shake." Upon Ifemelu suspecting that she is pregnant, she light-heartedly tells her auntie, "I think what happened to you before Dike came has happened to me. We ate the food a week ago." The downward spiral of Nigerian life is comically presented when students hope for short strikes because they cannot imagine having any strikes at all. Sister Ibinabo starts the student visa miracle vigil on Fridays. When Ifemelu comes face to face with a ghastly insect in the middle of the night, she decides to leave the American cockroach alone.

Irony is another narrative style put to good use in the novel, *Americanah*. It is a multi-faceted literary device that a writer uses to point out the discrepancy between what is expected and what occurs. When a writer uses irony in a work, there is incongruity in regards to the behaviour of characters, the words that they say or the events that take place. Most of the events in this novel are the opposite of what one would expect. Where everyone expects glamour and affluence in a first-class country, the reverse is true. The immigrants struggle, suffer and strain to make ends meet. Life is so hard that some wish they could go back home but cannot afford the fare. While America preaches morality and perfection, Ifemelu makes a rather disturbing discovery during an examination:

*It was a strange moment for me because until then I thought nobody in America cheated* (Chimamanda, 2013, p. 164).

But perhaps, the most prominent instance of irony is captured in the abnormal course of history: there is an influx of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. The illegal migrants are overcrowding an already crowded island. It is little wonder that while in Britain, Obinze notices that most of the people around him are having loud conversations in Yoruba and pidgin and for a moment, he sees the unfettered non-white foreignness of his situation. However, contrary to his expectations as he leaves his motherland, when he thinks of his mother and Ifemelu and the life he had imagined for himself and the life he now has, lacquered as it is by work and reading, by panic and hope – he realises that he has never felt as lonely.

Related to the above device is satire, which is, according to <https://qwiklit.com>, a genre of literature in which vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals and society into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be humorous, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society. Most of the satire in *Americanah* is presented in Ifemelu's blog where she criticises hairstyles, dress codes, American food, language, the immigrants' attitude and several other aspects. She posts the following reflection:

*Oh, fuck off. Black people get everything easy. You can't get anything in this country unless you are black. Black women are even allowed to weigh more* (Ibid, p. 306).

The author ridicules racial discrimination by illustrating that the so-called super race also has very many shortcomings and is a far cry from an ideal society. The immigrants are also shamed for sacrificing their traditions and culture at the altar of assimilation, in a bid to partake of the comforts of their host countries. The changed accents, religion, naming and other aspects, form the basis for this social criticism.

Several objects and words are used to symbolize abstract ideas in this text. Actions, people and places, all have symbolic attachments. These representations give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. ‘The film finished?’ ‘Excuse me, please, to eat,’ ‘No, I finish. Just small more.’ ‘How many do you have?’ This is the far Mariama and Halima’s command of the English language can go. It symbolizes their low status, both where they came from and where they are now. Their low education levels are also encompassed in such discourse that is full of grammatical errors.

The salon also represents a ‘home away from home’ for African immigrants. It is here that they discuss their challenges and share plans and strategies for how to survive the hurdles in the Diaspora. The sense of sisterhood is felt as the clients reveal their challenges, after which they are appropriately counselled. The improvement in their physical appearance also serves to give these immigrants inner peace and satisfaction.

Aunty Uju’s pregnancy is very symbolic. As Ifemelu observes:

*It marked the beginning of the end and made everything else seem rapid, the months rushing past, time hurtling forward. There was Aunty Uju, dimpled with exuberance, her face aglow, her mind busy with plans as her belly curved outwards (Chimamanda, 2013, p. 84).*

The beginning of the end mentioned here means that in becoming pregnant, Aunty Uju’s days of comfort and innocence are curtailed and she henceforth, starts a life of hustle, pain, discrimination and heartbreaks.

The presence of cockroaches, children attempting to commit suicide, teenagers suffering from eating disorders, failure to pay rent, beggars on the streets, acts of sexual perversion, teasing and bullying in schools and at workplaces, every challenge being called a disease and several other misdemeanours; are all symbolic of the fact that America and other developed countries are not thoroughgoing societies. They too have flaws and

the pictures’ perfect state presented to intending migrants has many holes poked in it.

Description is another narrative technique put to good use in this text. The horrors that immigrants go through to get visas to the Diaspora are heartrendingly narrated. What they do in order to survive is also presented. The near-suicide feelings that they encounter once disillusionment replaces expectation are also captured. The negative attitude of some members of the host countries is also aptly presented. Chimamanda (2013) applies powerful descriptions to arouse the readers’ sympathy for these immigrants and disapproval of those who make their lives in the host countries unmanageable.

Dialogue is also revealing as far as the status of the migrants is concerned. Their responses are guarded and reek of a sense of submission and being subdued. However, as they settle in, they start being more assured and assertive. During the class debates, the contributions of the African students show a renewed pride and confidence in their motherland. A female African student holds nothing back in defending her race:

*“That is nonsense,” the firm voice again. A voice unafraid. “If my mother hits me with a stick and a stranger hits me with a stick, it’s not the same thing.” Ifemelu looked at Professor Moore to see how the word “nonsense” had been received. She did not seem to have noticed. Instead, a vague terror was freezing her features into a smirk-smile (Ibid, p. 138).*

It is through such dialogue that we are introduced to the characters’ pains, plans, aspirations, intentions and ideologies. The author uses dialogue for narrative, philosophical and didactic purposes.

The Africans in the Diaspora keep on indulging in nostalgia about the good times of the life once lived in their motherland. Darling remembers:

*If this was at home, the place would be throbbing with life already: little kids riding...their screams rising like skyscrapers, the mothers gossiping and laughing, bodies constantly shuffling about because women*

*never stand still... toothless old people sprawled out like lizards basking in the sun... the dizzying aromas of morning foods cutting those perfumed smells. A strange feeling is coming over me (Ibid, p. 226).*

It is such nostalgia that keeps them grounded in their true identity so that the effects of assimilation do not have devastating consequences. The incessant comparisons and remembrances of the home give them a sense of identity because the emotional bonds in one's country of origin can never be adequately compensated for by the material rewards of the host nation. Fond memories remind the immigrants that whatever happens, Africa is where they truly belong. Darling struggles to contradict Stina's assertion:

*Stina also said leaving your country is like dying and when you come back you are like a lost ghost returning to earth, roaming around with a missing gaze in your eyes. I don't want to be that when I go back to my country (p. 160).*

Darling is convinced that if she does not remember where she is coming from, she will have problems establishing where she is going. When the immigrants remit some of their savings home, it is because they know that when push comes to shove, Africa will always welcome them. It is their first home.

A combination of evocative description and hyperbole makes the narrative in *We Need New Names* blend wit, pain and creative originality. The shocks and heartbreaks, the colour and energy (as described in *The Independent* and *The Times* newspapers) pulse to deliver the absurdity of living in the Diaspora. Dumi is forced to marry a physically discomfoting bride so that he can access citizenship papers. The protagonist's description leaves nothing to the imagination:

*The bride is white. Besides that, she is just rolls and rolls of flesh; I cannot help staring, cannot help thinking, but this is not just fatness... This American fatness takes it to another level: the body is turned into something else – the neck becomes a thigh, the stomach becomes an anthill, an arm a thing,*

*a buttock I don't even know what. Dumi's bride is fat and ugly... she is a freaking mountain... but the things people will do for these papers, my sister, I tell you (Ibid, p. 173).*

This bride is also a symbol of the largesse of the Western world. Such obesity translates into an abundance of material gain. The irony of this analysis is that in the African context, this is admired, yet frowned upon in the Diaspora.

The assertiveness and self-confidence of the children in the Diaspora are shown in the attitude of Kristal, who ever since she gets this "chest like she is going to breastfeed the whole of America", as observed by Darling, has taken to bossing people around.

The immigrant shame and self-loath are well captured as Darling describes the joy of coming face to face with food abundance after many years:

*We ate like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries; we ate like vultures, like stray dogs, like monsters; we ate like kings. We ate for all our past hunger, for our parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, and friends who were still back there. We uttered their names between mouthfuls, conjured up their hungry faces and chapped lips – eating for those who could not be with us to eat for themselves. And when we were full, we carried our dense bodies with the dignity of elephants – if only our country could see us in America, see us eat like kings in a land that was not ours (p. 239).*

Beneath the above exaggeration lies the dire straits facing the Africans back home. Lack of food is symbolic of the humiliation they are going through and the deprivation of the most basic of needs.

Several narrative devices are also employed in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. She employs a flat, direct narrative style, attuned to the generally mundane nature of existence. However, she is at the same time trying to persuade us of the reality of Najwa's spiritual awakening and getting us to accept her understanding of providential intervention (Rich, 2014). The tone is generally sad. There is a contrast between the comfortable,



self-assured and relaxed sense of living in Sudan and the subdued dialogues in London.

Kuman (2005) credits her prose which glistens with details of those things that define or unmake identity. The author presents a disconcerting portrayal of how rapidly the ground beneath one's feet can slip away. Najwa's spiritual awakening is clearly elaborated. The juxtaposition used to place Najwa's new role as a maid compared to that played by other maids in her Sudan home elaborates life's twists and turns:

*It takes me by surprise how natural I am in this servant role. On my very first day as a maid, memories rush back at me. All the ingratiating manners, downcast eyes, the sideway movements of the servants I grew up with. I must have been close to them, absorbing their ways ... now years later and on another continent, I am one of them* (Aboulela, 2006, p. 83).

This illustrates the fact that Diaspora living humbles the migrant. This reversal of roles is a paramount moral awakening for these exiles.

In conjunction with the above, the narrator's memoirs take us back to the days of glamour in Khartoum. But now, immigrants such as Najwa and family have to withstand the pain and hopelessness of being a maid and having a son/brother who is an inmate. Najwa also remembers the things left behind. The comparison between her mother's China and crystal glasses, air-conditioned walls, video recorders, television sets, freezers, cameras hi-fi systems and her present role as a maid, is meant to show her transition from grace to grass. She confesses to "having come down in the world" because her social status has taken a nosedive.

Dreams are also used to assist Najwa connect with her separated family. She always dreams of a better life, a resurrection of her sweet affluent childhood:

*I fell asleep and dreamt I was young again, lying in my parents' room in Khartoum. Mama was looking after me. I could feel the cool crisp sheets around me, the privilege of being in their bed* (p. 132).

These dreams are a manifestation of what the character mentally wishes for. The loneliness faced in the Diaspora fills the immigrants with desires to repossess what was left behind.

The camaraderie among Muslim women is an expression of their network of social capital. They love, care and provide a cushion of belonging and social security for one another. It is through such dialogues, especially at the mosque, that Najwa is able to find inner peace and rediscover the strong woman she is meant to be.

The musical chairs are an expression used by Anwar to explain the fact that nothing has changed in Sudan where there is coup after coup. Anwar's limping leg represents the torture that those who oppose African governments go through, and the hijab shows a sense of piety. Najwa starts wearing it when her commitment to religion is affirmed. The minaret is the face of change and spirituality for all those who go to it. These are some of the symbols that enhance the appreciation of this narrative.

Once it is established that there is a special smile that sales girls save for foreigners with money, the prevalence is not lost on the immigrants. It is clear that racial discrimination still abounds, and immigration life will first get worse before it can get better.

Some of the above narrative devices are also used to enhance the immigrant narrative in John Nagenda's *The Seasons of Thomas Tebo*.

The allusion of "take this cup from me", quickly comes to Tebo as he faces the tough choice of revealing to his girlfriend Namu, the sensitive part of his secret life, in addition to the fact that he is about to leave her behind as he goes back to exile. It is too much for Tebo to bear, well knowing that he will not return to his motherland anytime soon.

The dialogue between Hildah and Tebo brings out the hopelessness of life in exile. Hildah observes that Tebo has changed, and it seems something has been scooped out of him. Tebo volunteers to reveal that he is now devoid of his innocence. It is a strange conversation to be having on the busy

street in London but the two do not have much of a choice. Tebo also narrates how selfish he has become; again as a sign that exile forces you to only be concerned about yourself.

Whatever situation Tebo and other migrants go through, they always succumb to the comparison with home, whether it is the weather, friends, food or general well-being. This nostalgia is proof that their hearts will always belong to their motherland. Some of this nostalgia is demonstrated in these exiles' dreams:

*He had been dreaming that he was in Dondo, but long ago when he was young and still at school. All he could remember as the dream retreated was that young voices had been raised in play. It took him a little while to return to the present* (Nagenda, 1986, p. 67).

Dreams are a part of reaching back to or trying to reclaim the good old days back home. By doing the latter, it becomes clear that migrant life is challenging and that is why these Africans find it difficult to settle down physically and mentally.

## CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the contribution of Africans to the host countries should be appreciated. Africans in the Diaspora offer their labour and expertise, which are much needed for the advancement of their new establishments. The recipient nations are beneficiaries of this cheap labour. However, the host countries are uncompromising and highly exploitative of the undocumented labour of the illegal migrants. A case in point is Obinze in *Americanah*. He works hard but is made destitute, removed and eventually held in detention. This research has led to the conclusion that in spite of the few perks that come with a Diaspora-based livelihood, it is full of challenges and a far cry from the expectations of African immigrants.

## Recommendations

The key recommendation is that issues concerning the fictional depiction of life in the Diaspora should be looked at with renewed interest. At the same time, a study on cinematography of the

immigration theme is also a recommended area for further research.

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