



BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: A STUDY OF MIGRATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN “THE WHITE TIGER” AND “AMERICANAH.”

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Abstract: Migration not only involves the change in physical location but also the transformation of identity. In postcolonial literature, the themes of cultural identity and migration have been greatly explored. However, the influence of past (memory, history) and present (socio-cultural, and socio-political) narratives on migration and identity formation remains underexplored. From this perspective, this paper will examine how migration and cultural identity are portrayed in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Both novels showcase contemporary issues such as economic disparity, social identity, and the lasting effects of colonialism. In *The White Tiger*, through Balram's journey, India's rigid class system, corruption, and economic struggles can be seen. While in *Americanah*, talks about race and identity through its protagonist, Ifemelu, and her transnational experience. This paper, thus, highlights how different landscapes of India and Nigeria influence migration experiences and identity formation of the protagonists' in a contemporary world.

Key Words: Cultural Identity, Migration, Postcolonialism, Economic Disparity, Social Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In literature, Migration has been a central theme which shapes identity, displacement, and belonging. Postcolonial literature, in return, reflects the complexities of migration and its impact on the people. These are often shaped by history, memory, socio-cultural, and socio-political narratives. Migration can be challenging for an individual as it reshapes their identity, either by adapting to a new culture, resisting changes, or blending old and new traditions. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga (2008) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), explore migration and cultural identity, in different contexts. Adiga's *The White Tiger* examines internal migration and the struggles of breaking free from rigid economic structure. Meanwhile, *Americanah* delves into transnational migration, focusing on issues of race, self-acceptance and sense of belonging. Despite the different landscapes (India and Nigeria), both novels explore the influence of migration on an individual's identity. While Adiga presents migration as a class struggle where identity is shaped by economic disparity. Adichie portrays migration as a negotiation of racial and cultural identity. Both novels portray that migration is not only a process of crossing borders but also identity negotiation. Whether shaped by economic disparity (*The White Tiger*) or racial identity (*Americanah*), the protagonists must redefine themselves that challenge their sense of self.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Migration and cultural identity are the central themes in postcolonial literature. However, the role of memory, history, socio-cultural, and socio-political narratives in shaping identity and migration experiences remains underexplored. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie depict distinct portrayals of migration and identity formation within the landscapes of India and Nigeria.

Mohua Dutta (2022) examines rural-to-urban migration in India as in *The White Tiger*. She highlights Balram's journey to illustrate how migration is not always a path to freedom but often maintains class oppression and socio-economic inequalities.



Jha in her paper, "Migration and Identity Crisis in Adichie's *Americanah*" (2022) explores the identity crisis faced by African migrants. She highlights racial alienation and cultural displacement faced by Ifemelu in America. The paper also talks about her return to Nigeria and the struggle faced after her return.

Al-Tameemi and Palpanadan (2021) analyse both novels to show the individual's struggle with globalisation. The paper explores Balram's economic oppression and Ifemelu's racial identity crisis as the key factors in shaping their self-perception.

While these studies offer valuable insights, there is a gap in the literature concerning a direct comparative analysis of how different landscapes of India and Nigeria influence migration experiences and identity formation. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analysing the impact of past and present in the transformation of protagonists in both novels.

3. DISCUSSION:

The movement across borders be it internal or external has been associated with colonial history. Literature, thus talks about migration and portrays the struggles of people. It also showcases how migration influences identity formation. As the colonial nations reshaped themselves, migration- both internal and transnational- became a recurring reality in the contemporary world.

Migration, Economic Disparity, and Identity Formation in *The White Tiger*..:

Adiga focuses on the migration of the Protagonist, Balram Halwai, from the *Darkness* of his village in Laxmangarh, Bihar to the *Light* of Delhi and later to Bangalore. (1) This internal migration is primarily due to economic disparity and an oppressive caste system which limits the opportunities for individuals like Balram in rural areas. However, it does not guarantee social transformation but comes with different forms of exploitation in urban places. Balram, born poor and in the rigid class system, believes that the city will free him from the limitations imposed on him by his background. However, upon reaching Delhi, he realises that rich people benefit from exploiting rural migrants. In result, this stops migrants from achieving social mobility. As Mohua Dutta emphasises, *urban spaces do not emancipate the oppressed (caste or class) migrants; caste-free metropolises are a myth*. (1) This reflects the continual presence of caste and economic disparity in urban places. It thus contradicts the belief that cities provide equal opportunities to all. Even, Balram himself accepts this system of oppression through his "Rooster Coop" metaphor: *The greatest thing to come out of this country...is the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi...and look at the way they keep chickens...They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop* (p.173). (2)

This is not just a critique of rural India, but also the urban. Here poor remain entrapped by economic and social barriers even after migrating for opportunities. Throughout his time in Delhi, Balram is exposed to extreme discrepancy between rich and poor. The novel thus highlights the big gap between India's rising corporate class and lower economic groups. Balram, despite being physically present in an urban city, remains locked in his role as a servant. He realises that:

In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big bellies, and Men with small bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up (p.64). (2)

As far the evolution is concerned, Balram seeks it through rebellion and defiance. He realises that old methods won't allow him to break free from oppression, allowing him to embrace morally wrong actions. This in result leads him to kill his employer, Mr Ashok, a way to reject the economic system that has trapped him his whole life. As he says, it's not about surviving- it's about taking control and proving his worth. He then states:

All I wanted was the chance to be a man-and for that, one murder was enough (p.318). (2)

In the eyes of Balram, the murder is not a crime but an act of setting him free, reshaping his identity and creating a path where he can finally escape his path. Thus, his transformation into a self-made entrepreneur is not achieved through hard work and focus but through wrong methods and violence.

Transnational Migration, Racial Identity, and Cultural Displacement in *Americanah*..:

In *Americanah*, the theme of migration is explored through Ifemelu, who moves from Nigeria to the United States for higher education. As she arrives, she is forced to deal with complex challenges of radical identity and belonging. Before this, she never encountered racism before, she never had to think of herself as Black. However, in America, race becomes an important element of her identity and social experience. She states this change in her understanding of race as she states, *I did not think of myself as Black and I only became Black when I came to America* (p.290). (3) This shift in her identity signifies the change occurring within her as she tries to reconcile her Nigerian heritage with the racial identity imposed on her. She is often placed in the same category as African Americans, although



she has the same different cultural background and experiences. In her Blog, she highlights the racial categorisation issue as:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care (p.220). (3)

Globalisation seems to have a great impact on identity formation. The journey of Ifemelu showcases the complex relationship between adapting to a new culture and maintaining one's original culture. AI-Tameemi and Dr. Sarala note that, *attacks universalism and wants to identify the unique elects of Africa, rather than being enveloped by globalization or universalism.* (4) This perspective is evident in Ifemelu's migration as it involves a process of cultural displacement. She experienced being disconnected from her familiar environment and was forced to adapt to a different culture. In the U.S., she encountered the struggles of assimilation. Thus, for her code-switching becomes a method of survival, especially academically and in a professional context. In her migration experience, cultural negotiation is an important part of reflecting the societal pressure to fit into already established racial categories. Her experiences show the emotional and psychological changes migrants go through. They adjust to new identities by combining new and old aspects by pushing the limits of each.

Even after achieving academic and professional success, she experiences a sense of dislocation and decides for *return migration.* (5) This decision challenges the traditional idea that migration is a straight path to fit in and to set permanently in another country. Thus, her return signifies a reclamation of her original identity and critiquing the idea that success is only attained through Westernisation.

Influence of Past and Present in both novels.:

Migration, whether internal or transnational, deeply influences identity formation. This process is not only shaped by memory and history but also by socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. In *The White Tiger* and *Americanah*, memory and history serve as a powerful tool in shaping identity. But socio-cultural and socio-political structures in India and the United States respectively, impose more challenges that affect the self-perception of the protagonists'.

For Balram in *The White Tiger*, his memory and history were the main reasons for his desire to escape and redefine himself. The social limitations imposed by caste, class, and religion in his village, forms the "cage" that traps him. His memories of home are filled with darkness, injustice, and shame. He recalls the *grim situation in rural India* (4)– as his village suffers from inherent Poverty. Another memory is of his familial suffering as he reflects on his father's demise due to inadequate healthcare. Moreover, it is seen that Balram cannot properly forget where he came from. All is because of his experiences that show urban migration doesn't always lead to freedom from the same system of oppression and exploitation. This led him to reflect on his observation by using the metaphor of *Rooster Coop* (1) for how the Indian Political System operates. These experiences influence his identity formation as for someone who vows not to be a victim like the previous generation.

In contrast, memory and history play a very different role for Ifemelu in *Americanah*. Her migration to the U.S. resulted in cultural dislocation, as she was preoccupied with adapting to a new place. She was even exposed to racialism which she never experienced before. Moreover, historical contexts of Nigeria's postcolonial instability and economic hardship were also there in the mind. But, over time, her personal and collective memories of home serve as a source of strength and stability of identity. Her recollection of Nigeria is not just nostalgic but a tool to maintain her sense of self in a new world. As she writes in her blog, *In America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you* (p.337-338). (3) Thus, in many ways, her memories and history don't limit her. But they became the foundation upon which she rebuilds her identity.

Ultimately, both Adiga and Adichie highlight that socio-cultural and socio-political forces (class, oppression, race or gender) are important in shaping one's identity. The protagonists either bend or break under them in order to redefine themselves. In *The White Tiger*, class and political corruption shaped Balram's cynical, entrepreneurial identity. While in *Americanah*, racism and social expectations shaped Ifemelu's transnational, outspoken identity. Thus, these external forces, rooted in the histories and politics of the respected landscapes to reevaluate Balram's and Ifemelu's identities.

4. CONCLUSION:

Both of the novels, *The White Tiger* and *Americanah* portray that migration influences identity formation. The protagonists' experiences are shaped by memory, history, socio-cultural and socio-political forces they encounter. Balram's journey from rural 'darkness' to urban 'light' within India is to escape from poverty and the caste system. However, he soon realises that the city also has its own different forms of oppression. His memory, history and the struggles he faced push him to shed his past (take on a new name) and take a new identity. Despite the immoral methods



used, he ultimately redefines himself as an entrepreneur. In contrast, Ifemelu's migration to the United States forces her to confront racialism, a thing she never experienced before. Even she faces assimilation and race becomes a key part of her identity. Thus, both of the protagonists are shaped by their memories and history. However, they respond differently to new environments. As Balram seeks freedom by rejecting his past and fighting for power. Meanwhile, Ifemelu negotiates a new hybrid identity of blending her Nigerian and American selves.

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