FROM VIRTUAL MIGRATION TO GLOBALIZATION: THE PRESENCE OF THE ELSEWHERE IN THE HERE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK* AND *AMERICANAH*.

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Abstract

This study analyses the issue of the connection between virtual migration and globalization in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's literary works, namely *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) and *Americanah* (2013). Focused on postcolonial theoretical approach, precisely on Bill Ashcroft and his peers' conception on globalism, it demonstrates that virtual migration leads African people to globalization. In this vein, that current phenomenon is used as a gun by the ex-colonised to break-down the barriers between their peripheral position and the coloniser's central position.

Keywords: Central position, Globalism, Globalization, Peripheral position, Virtual migration.

Résumé

Cette étude analyse la question du rapport entre la migration virtuelle et la globalisation dans les œuvres littéraires de l'écrivaine Nigériane Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, à savoir, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), et *Americanah* (2013). S'appuyant sur la théorie postcoloniale, plus précisément sur la conception de Bill Ashcroft et ses collègues portant sur le ¨globalisme˝, elle démontre que la migration virtuelle mène le continent africain à la globalisation. Dans cette veine, ce phénomène est utilisé comme une arme par l'ex-colonisateur pour briser les barrières entre sa position périphérique et celle du colonisateur.

Mots-clés : Globalisme, Globalisation, Position périphérique, Position centrale, Migration virtuelle.

Introduction

The current African society is ruled by new technologies which make the continent different from the old one. They play a crucial role in making the world a single place, as they deal with a new kind of migration different from the physical migration. Clearly, physical migration refers to a moving away, or a movement of people from one place to another. It involves a physical separation whereas virtual migration throws light on a coming together and blurs the physical boundaries. In this line, the scholar Achille Mbembe observes in his book *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa (A. Mbembe, 2007, p. 28). Obviously, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa leads the whole world to globalization, in which African communities and their people are embedded, since in this present time, one can notice the presence of Africa in the elsewhere and the presence of the elsewhere in Africa.

Standing in the same line, Nigerian female writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie pictures in her novel *Americanah* and her collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a modern world in which each culture and tradition are represented in every part of the world thanks to the elements of the new technology. In doing so, she uses virtual migration as a significant means to assert the African culture and identity of her characters. In the same way, she makes use of this contemporary means to take part to the development of the whole world. Indeed, the meeting of people coming from diverse horizons creates a clash of culture, changes their vision of life, and impacts their identity, in the sense that it becomes an oxymoron. Additionally, the process of globalization makes people interact with each other freely and rapidly through internet and its subordinates.

The aim of this article is to analyse Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah* by focusing a particular attention on the connection between virtual migration and globalization and the presence of the "elsewhere" in the "here" and vis versa. What are the different elements of virtual migration portrayed by Adichie in her two literary works? Likewise, how do her characters use new technologies to assert and redeem their defamatory image in the global age?

Using postcolonial concepts, mainly that of globalism defined as "the process of the world becoming a single place" (B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, 2000, p. 100), this article

highlights the emergence of electronic literature and its impact on globalization as seen by Adichie in her works.

1. Electronic Literature in Globalization

Electronic literature is a form of "literature that started to appear with the advent of computers and digital technology." (D. Grigar, J. O'Sullivan, 2021, p. 9). It is a typical literature based on new technologies, made possible through the means of a computer or sometimes a mobile phone. In this current world, the use of electronic literature is increasing more and more and plays a predominant role in globalization, since African people are now capable to share online their experiences as African migrants. In contemporary African literature, electronic literature is used by postcolonial African writers to denounce racial discrimination, injustices, and other social issues African people undergo in the modern world. In the same lens, electronic literature is used by indigenous writers to decenter the colonial authority and serves as a powerful tool for the ex-colonized to move from periphery to center, in the sense that it helps send Africa in the elsewhere and brings the elsewhere in Africa.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's imaginative arts, precisely in *Americanah*, her protagonist Ifemelu makes use of an electronic literature to create an online globalized community, in which she informs, denounces and struggles against racial discrimination African migrants usually live in the United States of America, and all over the world at large. In other terms, gathering different societies online, Ifemelu's online community aims at "longed for others listeners. Thus, she longed to hear the stories of others" (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 216) in order to help and encourage them to break their silence and denounce social injustices they live every day to free themselves. Accordingly, her blogs are considered as a space where both Nigerian and American community encounter. Likewise, it is also considered as a space of meeting, where people from diverse horizons gather themselves. The blogsphere is considered as a place in which the colonial authority's voice does not matter, a place in which racism is just a mere word that exists in dictionaries or in another world, a place where everyone is citizen of the same community no matter their origins and racial differences. In this respect, the citizens of that virtual environment feel free since their differences are acknowledged on equal terms. In the same way, the interaction with new technology shapes the members of the blogsphere s' identity. Focusing

on what has already been foreshadowed, Ifemelu's blogsphere gives sense to globalization of the modern world, as it expresses sameness in diversity.

In the same perspective, Adichie pictures another issue in her short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" related to electronic literature. Through her protagonist called Ujunwa, the Nigerian writer sheds light on African women's globalized existence through electronic literature. Clearly, the character writes an electronic story about Akunna in which she expresses her feelings about women's injustices and denounces males' abuses, in order to escape from the isolation of her physical world. The story of Akunna reflects Ujunwa's real life, in which she always undergoes sexual harassments for being a black woman. This is plausible in the following narration: "Edward's eyes were always leering when he looked at Ujunwa, (…) he would never look at a white woman like that because what he felt for Ujunwa was a fancy without respect" (C. N. Adichie, 2009, p. 65). In this respect, the woman's computer is set to be a safe place, where she can unzip herself. As a matter of fact, the writer always gives the following precisions, before she starts writing: "she sat in front of her laptop" (C. N. Adichie, 2009, p. 60), "she sat before the laptop" (C. N. Adichie, 2009, p. 62), "she turned on her laptop" (C. N. Adichie, 2009, p. 65). These precisions are given to stress on the character's comfort when she faces her laptop, which is the main tool to write an electronic story. Likewise, moving from her physical space to a virtual space can also be considered as a kind of migration, since as far as Jessica Hagen-Zanker is concerned, migration is the "temporary or permanent move of individuals or groups of people from geographic location to another for several reasons" (J. Hagen-Zanker, 2008, p. 4). In this context, the character moves to another space in order to express her feelings freely as already mentioned.

In conjunction with the previous point, Ujunwa's electronic story serves to denounce what black women cannot express freely in the physical world. This is considered as a way to break the silence and voice the unvoiced. Besides, the cyberspace is used by Adichie's character to free herself from all sort of injustices African women undergo in the current world by men. Generally speaking, before, during and after colonization, women's cause remains a sensible topic portrayed at the central of postcolonial writers' literary production. The concept of feminism has been created to fight-down all sort of injustices, African women undergo in their different societies and in the world at large. In this condition, the cyberspace is used in the modern world by postcolonial

African writers "to visualize new possibilities and construct a new scale along which one can attempt to progress" (B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, 2002, p. 188) especially those living in the same conditions like Ujunwa. Besides, in modern African literature, the cyberspace is part of the new opportunities that offer globalization, since African women in general use to break their silence, to construct a new identity, to reframe their defamatory image, in order to move from invisible to visible or from margin to centre in this global time. Accordingly, globalization does not exclude African women since they are considered as human beings, and also able to bring something new as well as men and white women, in the current global age. In short, electronic literature can be counted among elements of virtual migration, in the sense that it grants people a new space or a new world, where they feel free to express themselves, and in which racial discrimination is no longer a big deal. Following the same perspective, the Nigerian writer portrays other elements of virtual migration such as calling and emailing that play a crucial role in making the whole world a global one.

2. Calling/Emailing Africa in the Elsewhere and Vice-versa

Calling or emailing the elsewhere in Africa and vice-versa is what characterizes the current world. The modern African subject gets that power to call the elsewhere in his here, as well as his colonizer by the means of mobile phones or through emails. They also use these new technologies to denounce racism and other social issues African migrants go through. This is what we call a communicative travel. People are now no longer obliged to physically travel to know what is happening outside their country, as migration is possible by the means of mobile phones and emails. That is a new form of migration the modern world offers to all citizens of the world, and not only to a given community. Accordingly, nowadays, having a mobile phone or an email account is no longer associated to luxury. It is rather associated to human necessity, since the twenty-first century is characterized by an increasing mobility.

Known as one of the "nouveaux passeurs de culture par excellence" (K. Adou, 2015, p. 150), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes use of the new technologies to send her African culture abroad and at the same time, she brings westerners' culture in Africa through the same link. The use of emails in the present time is pictured in her stories as more than vital, since it helps Indigenous people keep in touch with their native culture no matter their current geographical and spatial position in the world. In the same direction, it helps African migrants to denounce social

injustices they always go through in their host community. This is justified by the narrator in *Americanah*, when he upholds: "Ifemelu wrote a long e-mail to Wambui about the bookstore, the magazines, the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished." (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 216). In this specific case, Ifemelu's emails serve to denounce things unsaid and unfinished, as she was able to say things "so raw and true" (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. p. 216) in that online community.

In the same perspective, emailing Africa helps African migrants to get in touch with their African native language. In the same novel, one can see both protagonists of the novel get in touch with their mother tongue by the means of email as evident in the following line: "Ceiling, kedu? Hope all is well with work and family." (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 19). Clearly, 'kedu' is part of Nigerian dialect, and depicts at the same time Ifemelu's connection to her local language. Chatting with a Nigerian citizen living in London by the means of e-mail, the character is able to use her local language readily, a privilege she cannot get in her new place, while interacting with its citizens because of the cultural and language differences. Likewise, this is an expression of globalization, since her online message gathers three different communities or continents of the world, namely, Nigeria, America, and London. As a matter of fact, one can come to the conclusion that, emailing Africa or the elsewhere is part of virtual migration which helps African migrants denounce social injustices, and in the same way, it sends people to globalization.

Moving so, calling Africa or calling the elsewhere using the means of mobile phones, is also obvious in Adichie's fiction. This specific tool is set to be a verbal communicative instrument, and it plays a significant role in globalization, in the sense that it is utilized to expand conversations all over the world. Besides, it is used to connect different countries, and grants interrelationship between people in the whole world without any distinction. The use of mobile phones plays an important role as already mentioned, since it helps improving the ex-colonized lives and bring them into the center as equal to the colonial authority. In the same lines, it breaks the inferiority complex in which African people at large get themselves in the course of colonization. Additionally, the elsewhere in the here or the here in the elsewhere through mobile phones is plausible in Adichie's collection of short stories, precisely in "The Shivering". In fact, after hearing the news about a 'plane crashed' in Nigeria, the protagonist by the use of her mobile phone calls her parents and her friends in Nigeria, "making cup after cup of Earl Grey that she

allowed to get cold." (C. N. Adichie, 2009, p. 86). Living in America, the character is able to call Africa in America. In another way, the protagonist is capable to communicate with both communities, namely, her host American community and her native Nigerian fellows in Nigeria, and at the same time. Likewise, thanks to mobile phones, it is easier for Ukamaka to be in Africa with her relatives, in order to help them sort out the current issue they go through, while living in America, her host community. This privilege is granted by the presence of new technologies that offer the global current world. To term it differently, the new technologies can connect different nations, and cultures of the world, and at the same time.

In the same perspective, the use of mobile phone in Adichie's collection of short stories helps African migrants to get in touch with their local language and local culture. On that point, portraying a conversation between Ukamaka and her mother in the story, it is mentioned: "The phone rang. (…) "Nne, Udenna is fine." (C. N. Adichie, 2009, pp. 188-189). 'Nne' is a Nigerian local expression that is expressed only in conversations between Nigerian fellows, as they are the only people able to understand the meaning of this local term. This is part of their culture and tradition. In this context, the communicative system helps Ukamaka be connected to her native culture, tradition and habits. Going further, the Nigerian writer captures another form of travel based on images, and considered to be part of virtual migration in general. To be clear enough, it is used to represent the elsewhere in Africa and vice versa through images.

3. Representing the Elsewhere in Africa Through Images: A Case Study of Obinze in *Americanah*

The trip around the world is also possible by images. In other terms, the power of reading a book, a magazine, and so on, or watching a movie can affect a subject's identity and make him becoming a global citizen. This aspect is a fact that face people in the present time. It refers to be an imaginative travel. It is defined as another form of migration depicted by the modern world, and made possible through the means of books, televisions, movies, and everything that concerns the sight. As a consequence, migration through books or movies is set to be possible and significant in the modern world, as it leads people to globalization. In the same way, books, articles, movies, and so on, reflect the culture and tradition of a given community. As a matter of fact, reading an American book for instance, is learning American culture, tradition, and habits. Moreover, after reading a specific book, some readers intend to apply what they learnt from that

book or movie in their physical society. Standing in the same line, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie captures Obinze in *Americanah* as a flawless illustration of a global citizen thanks to American magazines, and films he always watches in his here, before going abroad. To term it differently, Obinze becomes like an American citizen in Nigeria and among Nigerians thanks to imaginative travel. As such, he brings the elsewhere (abroad) in his here (Nigeria), as narrated in the following lines:

> He was fluent in the knowledge of foreign thing, especially of American things. Everybody watched American films, and exchanged faded American magazines, but he knew details about American presidents from a hundred years ago. Everybody watched American shows, but he knew about Lisa Bonet leaving *The Cosby Show* to go and do *Angel Heart* and Will Smith's huge debts before he was signed to do *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "You look like a black American" was his ultimate compliment, which he told her when she wore a nice dress, or when her hair was done in large braids. Manhattan was his zenith. He often said "It's not as if this is Manhattan" or "Go to Manhattan and see how things are." (…) "It's written in different American dialects," Obinze said. (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 53).

Thanks to the reading of some American magazines, some American films, to name but some, Obinze becomes a citizen of the world, as he is not limited to his own community and culture alone, but he expands his knowledge with foreign things. In this condition, Obinze becomes a true modern global citizen. Additionally, surfing in a host culture, environment, tradition, education, to quote a few, the second *Americanah*'s protagonist Obinze as a global citizen agrees with the idea about knowledge can help better understand individuals and places in this new world. Besides, with his new cultural identity, he "shows cultural diversity by exhibiting the influence of many countries and cultures" (K. A. Appiah, 2006, p.115). To be clear enough, the global citizenship does not exclude the ex-colonized population. Rather, it gathers colonizers and subjugated people, as it grants them the same rights and duties all over the world. In this regard, one can say, the struggle of postcolonial African writers begins to bear some fruits, in the sense that those African considered in the past as barbarians and not worthy to be human, are now included. Accordingly, the global age gives birth to cultural diversity that everyone without any distinction is called to experience, because of the increasing creation of imaginative tools. It helps the postcolonial writers redeem their defamatory image, as it breaks all the walls established in the course of colonization between colonized and colonizers, and grants them all the same central position. Again, in the global era, the ex-colonized are interested in "the need to move the centre

from all minority class establishments within nations to real creative centres among the working people in conditions of gender, racial and religious equality" (N. W. Thiongo, 1993, p. xvii).

Following the same perspective, most of Adichie's literary works are not published in Africa even though she is African and her books reflect African culture. Rather, they are published in New York, London, Toronto, and so on. The main reason is to help American, British, Canadians people travel in Africa, acknowledge its culture and tradition, and in the same way, discover its glorious past, in order to break-down the negative results of the colonizers' single story about Africa's image. As a matter of fact, Adichie's literary corpus can be counted among those books which contribute to imaginative travel in the present time. Differently speaking, reading the Nigerian writer's book in New York or London, or Toronto, the American or Canadian or British reader can travel to Africa, or like Obinze, the foreign reader can bring African culture and tradition in his here. In this regard, the writer depicts the current time as a time of adaptation in which the elsewhere is in the here and the here is also foreshadowed in the elsewhere. This can also be considered as a time of chaos, since nothing is at its right place. All these aspects mentioned earlier grant the migrant subjects a global citizenship, which breaks-down the barriers between the center and the periphery. Thereupon, virtual migration is correlated as a powerful means to decenter the imperial discourse, and claims for a cultural parity in the global age.

Conclusion

Reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* enabled us to study the representation of virtual migration in African fiction. To cap it all, virtual migration has been demonstrated through electronic literature, emailing or calling Africa, and representing the elsewhere in Africa thanks to foreign magazines, foreign movies, and so on, that are presented on a given territory. All these elements are part of the new technologies the present time offers to all citizens without any distinction and coming from diverse horizons, and lead people to globalization. In a short, virtual migration leads to globalization, thanks to its different elements previously foreshadowed, in the sense that they help African women to get free from the isolation and sexual harassments they always go through. They help African people at large denounce racism and racial discrimination they undergo in their host place. In the same context, African migrants are now able to email or call Africa abroad and vice versa.

Finally, new technologies help African people at large become citizens of the whole world through an imaginative travel. In this regard, the current world rejects all ideas about differences and claims for cultural sameness. To put it in another way, every culture, tradition, people, races, to quote a few are supposed to be acknowledged in the global time on equal terms. In conjunction with the idea of globalization, the sociologist writer John Urry comes to the conclusion that, the global current age is focused on new technologies and in this period, all places, all countries, all communities and all societies are linked each other (J. Urry, 2007, p. 209).

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