

Pop Culture and the Negotiation of New Literary Spaces in Contemporary Nigerian Novels

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Abstract

Existing studies on pop culture have mostly fixated on two phenomena: globalization and the influence of pop culture on media and the youth across the global space. However, the primary focus of this essay is to foreground how contemporary Nigerian novelists have manipulated and adapted the homogenizing influence of pop culture in narratives. This development, a dominant discourse in postcolonial discourse reflects in part, the experience of the people in the face of increasing globalization, transculturality, and cosmopolitanism. The central thesis of this discourse, therefore, is that pop culture provides an expressive field through which contemporary novelists mirror the cultural, political, and social conflicts of this age. It is inferred that the writers deploy popular art to explore contemporary attitudes and realities. Besides, narrative devices are adopted to aesthetically communicate ideas, visions, and criticism on vital socio-political and cultural issues. Using the postcolonial approach for its analysis, it is argued that the choice of culture and its consumption is an expression of class belonging and the mark of class difference in the world view of the postcolonial state. The study concludes that (the novels) tangible objects are replete with refashioning approaches to keep up with the changing paradigm in the global space.

Keywords: Pop culture, Postcolonialism, Transculturalism, Cosmopolitanism, Nigerian novels

Introduction

Pop culture indicates a movement from conventionality. It is a shift from the existing paradigm to accommodate the transculturality of the global space. As a dominant feature of contemporary society, it explores how people across the globe are constantly sharing practices, beliefs, and objects that embody shared meanings in the world's social system. Generally, pop

culture is marked by the pull of philosophies and contrasting forms of social behavior evident in culture consumption. Consequently, the increasing rate of globalization in the world and the attendant cosmopolitan identity have inspired quite several Nigerian novelists to authenticate the portrayals of events by exposing us to new perspectives in literary circles while creating a mental view of present social realities. In this regard, Nigerian novelists' negotiation of new literary space is such that they search for symbols and patterns with which to explain the world on various planes of experience in contemporary Nigerian socio-cultural space.

Existing studies have traced the influence, forms, and dynamics of popular culture on youth within the global space. Such studies (Yadav, 2018; Vyomakesisi, Sonu & Srinath 2020; and Muhammed, 2021) in separate discussions underscored the development of pop culture, trends, and impact on the youths specifically and the culture at large. All these endeavors are replete with discussions on the ways popular culture forms have continued to rise and its effects but none considered literary writers' exploration of the effects of popular culture on our value system and the society at large. Besides, no attention is given to narratives and the role of literary resources in evaluating the influence of pop culture in Nigeria's socio-cultural space. Recognizing the relevance of pop culture in the global space, the present study seeks to bring to the fore the inimical effects of pop culture on Nigerian youth and the African value system at large despite its socializing influence. Within the context of this present study, Chimamanda Adichie, Abimbola Adelokun, and Diana Evans lament the evil of the new culture in Nigeria's social space and the disruption it brings, which appears to be in opposition to the moral values enshrined in our indigenous culture. The literary styles of the novelists become central to our discussion because contemporary Nigerian narratives have become a tool for interrogating the disruption of our indigenous culture and the representation of spatial and temporal space. Through the postcolonial approach to criticism, the paper aims to interrogate the impact of migration as a popular culture among the youths and vulgarity within Nigerian socio-cultural space.

The Contextuality of Meaning: Postcolonialism as an Essential Discourse of Pop Culture

It is now a critical truism that pop culture is in large measure instructive for the understanding of postcoloniality as it is for the over-reaching effects of the domination of hegemonic world powers. In the context of this study therefore, the invention of popular culture in the present fashion is necessitated by the transmutation of literary writers' expressions of the interference of Western cultural hegemony on Africa's identity and tradition. It aligns with this foregrounding that the twenty-first-century contemporary Nigerian novelists acknowledged the challenge to the social values of the Nigerian system as a result of contact with other cultures. The subject matter which Adichie Chimamanda, Adelakun Abimbola, and Diana Evans explored is cosmopolitan and the relativeness of their approaches to the subject of popular culture and their style of expression reveals that since the contact with the Western world, there is a multicultural mold to force the image of the colony on the subjects. This development as an indication explains why the cultural and political fixity with the West remains a dominant feature in the works of postcolonial Nigerian writers. Elleke Boehmer holds that:

The generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveler, or an 'extra- territorial' than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'Third World' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or postcolonial connections with a national background (p. 233).

While it cannot be denied that the Nigerian novelist's embrace of pop culture represents a victory for the transformative contamination that came with colonialism, its enthusiastic reception raises difficulties for how pop culture in narratives can be interpreted more generally. Also, where the early Nigerian writers often lamented about the fragmentation of reserved intangible culture, contemporary writers enthusiastically embrace the intervention which gives imaginative forms to the dislocated world of individuals living at the periphery. Theirs is a stance signifying not distance from the world but a connection, a

commitment to writing what colonialism put asunder, linking the Third World and the First, and above all, emphasizing how the cultural experience of one has for so long been bound up in that of the other. This explains why Elleke Boehmer (2012) believes that “the view of the Centre is that the world is heterogeneous but ultimately one, that cultural difference is transportable and if not, is likely not to be interesting”(p.239). From the foregoing, it is possible to recognize the Centrist’s imposition of cultural legacy in the postcolonies. In this regard, the quest to reclaim the image of the periphery, especially for self-definition of the perception of the colonized Other that the contemporary novelists through the use of language refashioned the approaches to negotiate the burgeoning new world order within the literary space. Pursuing this argument, Elleke (1995) maintains:

Postcolonial (writer) uses the poststructuralist concept of language as indeterminate, multilayered, and historically contingent to shed light on how anti-colonial resistance might work in texts. Authority, we know, whether colonial or otherwise, usually takes care to supervise its meanings. Yet despite its best efforts, meanings remain partial, unstable, and susceptible to permutation and translation. Due to their differential position in any discursive situation, they constantly enacted what poststructuralism calls the contestability of signs. From the perspective of cultural heterogeneity or hybridity, they generated diverse possibilities of interpretation. Though ventriloquizing the colonizer’s voice, and identifying themselves in the vocabulary of their oppression, they do mixed up and upturned dominant meanings. (p.173).

From the foregoing, we can aver that contemporary Nigerian writers have created an imaginative space beyond the ambiance of colonial definitions and identified the changing cultural trend as a postcolonial strategy while providing the narratives as a medium for expressing this philosophy. This development explains the trend, in most post-colonies, of pop culture and cosmopolitanism, vulgarism, youth subculture, and

transcultural modernism. It is on this note that Richard Webner asserts that, 'in its multiple shifting realities, the postcolonial encompasses contradictory complexity and times out of time' (1996, p.2). The shifting realities identified by Webner suggest the incongruities of popular culture and the dethronement of morality, a phenomenon that reflects social anomalies now wrongly projected as popular culture. To this end, pop culture within the Nigerian cultural space is not a form of dislocation but an expansion of cultural and aesthetic experience. A consequence of negotiating pop culture in the Nigerian literary space is that a gap is bridged between the Third and First Worlds and narratives have assumed a canonized dimension through the establishment of the Centre. And yet, because of that very success of bridging, contemporary novels can appear very far removed from the material culture of Nigerian society which frequently characterizes the literary output attempt at breaking the grip of the West. Therefore, the interstices of new spaces by contemporary Nigerian writers show that there is an intermingling paradigm between the West and the Other. The object under theoretical scrutiny- popular culture is both historically viable and in part construed by the very act of theoretical engagement. This is further complicated by the fact that different theoretical perspectives have tended to focus on particular areas of literary engagement.

Mapping the Variant of Popular Culture in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

The mass emigration of youths from Nigeria mirrors the underlying problem of failed leadership, a crippled economy, and insecurity. These indices coupled with a constellation of push and pull factors trigger the popular parlance 'japa', a popular culture among Nigerian youths who flee their motherland in search of security and greener pastures in foreign countries. In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Adichie explores the deplorable condition of postcolonial societies premised by political malaise and crippling economy which has resulted in the mass migration of youth within the working class age. In novels like *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), *A Thing around your Neck* (2009), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013), the subject of migration and individual identity in the global space is interrogated. Adichie presents an extensive fragment of experiences through the love

story that crosses Nigeria, England, and America to reiterate the effect of migration in a broadened spectrum of popular culture viz-a-viz burgeoning global economies to articulate the complexities of transculturality, transnationality, and transterritoriality.

To this end, an attempt is made to explore the damaging effect migration has on individuals in the face of globalization and cosmopolitanism. In *Americanah*, Adichie contextualizes hybridity, a condition of the migrants as de rigueur such that the characters in the narrative can function effectively within emerging multiple cultures. For Adichie, migration has become a popular culture among the youths despite the problems of alienation, solitude, and hostility of the host culture. This development coupled with the phenomena of multiculturalism, transculturalism, and transvaluation has led to the creation of cultural hybrids; individuals who are fluid in form, especially in terms of local and global formulation, and oscillate between different socio-cultural realities.

Thus, against the backdrop of the overwhelming challenges in this neoliberal age, the phenomenon of migration as a popular culture has produced new challenges for the émigrés identified in *America*. Adichie seems to suggest that migration is a result of social blindness and the search for identity. This social blindness is often influenced by the label that has been ascribed to individuals who sojourn abroad in search of better education and greener pastures. Explaining why there is an increase in the number of young migrants, Obinze points out that:

There is a need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised, well-fed and water but merely in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look inwards somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, to leave, none of them starving or raped or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty (*Americanah*, p.276)

Why does Adichie capture such perplexity in one of the main characters? The implication of this is that migration as popular culture is well defined in the Nigerian state to have been

closely linked to a failed social system and economic and political institution and structure. For Obinze, just like most Nigerian youths, leaving the shores of the country for anywhere else is a beacon of hope, which seems to be the best way of manoeuvring out of the dark socio-economic intricacies of their natal country. Ifemelu and Obinze assume that being raised in fairly comfortable families is a definite way of escape from the malaise of political tyranny, corruption, ethno-religious crisis, political violence, election rigging, misgovernance, embezzlement of public funds, and different malaise which have encumbered development in post-Independence Nigeria.

For Adichie, choicelessness becomes a reason for migration. Can this choicelessness be defined in terms of the inability to change prevailing social, political, or economic challenges or choicelessness which comes from the inability to maximize one's potential or the inability to create a new social and political structure or the lack of opportunities as a result of restricting political environment? Whichever way one examines the aforementioned reasons, it will not be completely out of place to adduce to have some factors as responsible for the influx in the number of illegal migrants from sub-Sahara African countries to different continents of the world. Besides, while the answer to these questions may not be one-sided, migration out of the perplexities of crippling underdevelopment coupled with the impoverished condition of the Third world countries makes migration to become a means to an end. Dispirited individuals are often left with no choice but to leave their motherland and find opportunities outside the shores of their countries. The trauma in diasporic and exilic narratives is therefore only a step in the trajectories of the many complexities associated with sojourning in a foreign land, as the migrant waits to discover a sense of helplessness and despair while he fights the sense of negation from the new environment which stifles his aspirations as he continues to struggle for survival, acceptance, and social recognition.

In Adichie's *Americanah*, the pain of migration is initiated with the vagueness that comes with the dissipation of the American dream. The anxiety of being able to fit in the social order; the acceptable world order and the existing racial structure leaves most of the characters in a discomfiting state. Ifemelu rightly points out that "America has a way of subduing the

migrants” (p.110). Here, Adichie examines the pain of being treated like a second-class citizen, living in buildings that smelt of neglect, the low-paying job that defines their social class, and assuming a dual identity to gain recognition and acceptance. The pain of these experiences is characterized by the migrant’s wearing of an acceptable look while feigning their accent to become visible and possibly securing employment that makes them hybrids. Therefore, the hybridization of Adichie’s characters not only creates a split in their personality, it also leaves them floating in the new role they have created for themselves. The consequence of this popular culture is the creation of individuals with complex personalities. This complexity is exhibited in their nuances and the exaggerated ego they have built for themselves.

Bartholomew, a divorced accountant seeking the hand of Aunt Uju in marriage, has left Nigeria for thirty years; and, the very first time he is introduced, he is described as “lost”. He is lost in the present state of “things in his country” (*Americanah*, p.117). For Bartholomew, home has become a mirage, a thing that exists as a fleeting shadow. The inner conflict of Bartholomew is reinforced by his constant struggle to keep abreast of events from home while not being completely informed, and the need to keep up with the dictate of his new home. Nigeria for people like Bartholomew has become an “imaginary homeland”. His blind argument with Ifemelu reflects his state of “in-betweenness”. While not completely integrated into his migrant country, his ‘Americanah’ status does not fully permit him to go back to his roots and learn the basics he has probably missed out on as a result of his thirty-year sojourn abroad.

More fundamentally, Adichie’s engagement with the migrant country’s non-acceptance of the academic qualification of the migrant intelligentsia is also indicative of the manner a person’s personality is bruised, which consequently results in trauma. Aunt Uju has to continue writing examinations that will qualify her to become a family physician, while Ifemelu is only able to get a job and a residence permit as a result of Curt’s influence. The ponderous question at this juncture is: is the academic qualification of the migrant intelligentsia of any value? If it is not, the Western model of academic qualification which was passed to independent African nations calls for scrutiny.

In another breathe, if America, the dream country could create individuals who struggle to maintain physic balance as a result of various negative experiences they have been subjected to, then it is an unhealthy testimony that such an idolized country is incapable of providing succor for those who come to the countries as an escape from the various economic and political challenges which had made them flee from their respective countries. In a similar twist, the statue of liberty and the phrase engraved on the base of "The New Colossus", "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" have made the United States become a major destination point for migrants in the face of the many challenges which have besieged Third World Countries. However, the flawed exigencies of the migration policies negate the insinuation of freedom in a society whose capitalist liberal principles have made young women continually be recruited as domestic servants and subjected to humiliating treatment while they try to adapt to the new environment. Adichie deflates the ballon of deception hankered around becoming an Americanah, a notion flunked around with impunity, especially by "the been tos" who see living abroad as a mark of affluence. Adichie's vision is an implicit request that Nigerians should confront the consequences of living in these complicated times through a collective national reassessment of their humanity, nationality, and moral identity.

Youth Subculture in Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roof* and Diana Evans 26a

Youth subcultures are an obvious example of the visibility of popular culture. A youth subculture is known through the materiality of what it consumes. This is visible in the choice of drug, a particular dress code, social spaces that are occupied, and a particular pervading of an aural landscape. Pop culture helps to establish a sense of identity among youths. Storey (2015) points out that pop culture mirrors attitudes and sentiments that are already there, and at the same time provides an expressive field and a set of symbols through which these attitudes can be projected (p.276). The material capacities of global cultural practices are such that they transform what individuals do. Roland Barthes (1995, p. 182) posits that 'all objects which belong to a society have a meaning.' This meaning is such that the realized signification of material objects is built on the premise that 'humanity gives meaning to words'. One dominant

feature of pop culture is the shift or complete replacement of everyday language use. Contemporary Nigerian writers portray vulgarism in the linguistic expressions of characters explored in the novels.

Storey (2015) avers that for many young people in Nigeria, pop culture represents a force of liberation against the certainties of everyday life. It is the collective dream world of individuals. It is on this note that Richard Maltby (1984, p.14) asserts that pop culture provides escapism that is not an escape from or to anywhere but an escape from our utopian selves'. Storey explains further that contemporary vulgar culture is brutal and disturbing: the quasi-expression of the uprooted and culturally dispossessed inhabitants of anonymous cities, contriving mythologies which reduce to manageable form the general spread of corruption in a world where the social bases of old loyalties and heroisms have long been destroyed'. In *Under the Brown Rusted Roof*, Abimbola Adelakun explores the influence of cosmopolitanism on youths who leave rustic and rural life to migrate to the city. The influence of city life soon rubs off on them as soon as they acquire a new language and slang to have a sense of belonging. In the case of Alhaji Arigbabuwo, his religious inclinations did not deter his children from acculturating to the wiles of city life. Despite being from a responsible home Arigbabuwo's children are enthralled by the popular culture in the urban city. Upon leaving their communal roots, one becomes a thug to politicians while the other engages in singing raving sensational music. It should be averred that this form of rootlessness identified by Adelakun has created complex social miscreants who make up a large population of youths found in contemporary societies. Adelakun seems to suggest that vulgarity is aimed at dissolving traditional cultures. In a musical album released for public consumption, Ramoni, an upcoming fuji artiste and one of Alhaji Arigbabuwo's sons sings:

Rafiu Alao, the fine boy who could sleep
With a woman up to the breast.
He is a fine boy, a fine driver
Husband of Mulika, tall and handsome
He knows how to enjoy life.
(*Under the Brown Rusted Roof*, p.162)

Ramoni's utterances are meant to expose the frivolous lifestyle of an average youth in postcolonial societies. Rafiu symbolizes the rascally political thug that constitutes the hallmark of the changing dynamic of postcolonial societies. These emergent language expressions apart from being a product of radicalism and changing social value also portends postcolonial ruptures with specific reference to acceptable social behavior. Popular culture as espoused in contemporary narratives shows a systemic influence on a culture so bizarre such that the old age is treated with contempt while the youths continue leading profligate lives. Ramoni sings further:

In Lagos, no man sleeps with a woman and pays
any more
Lagos girls were so 'woken up' that they know
that sex is enjoyed by two people and no one
person should pay.
The elephant fell into the well at night, has she
not gone from darkness to darkness?
I need someone to hand over my grandmother to
disvirgin.
I, the African Mc Hammer want to sing for you
tonight.
(*Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, p.163)

For Ramoni, living in a cosmopolitan city like Lagos gives a form of exposure. According to him, the 'girls were so woken up' to such an extent that indiscriminate sexual practice should be viewed as a form of leisure. While prostitutes charge money in exchange for sex, Lagos girls offer sex freely with no monetary value added to their bodies. The novelist uses some bold expressions to demystify sex and sexuality. Her approach to popular culture is the depiction of vulgar language and the textual representation of prostitution. Thus, the social anomaly seen in operation is a metaphor for a postcolonial society viciously submerged in the institutionalization of random sex as a popular culture. In *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, women are viewed from a skewed perception because of the liberalism with which sexual intimacy between a man and a woman is treated. Sexual pleasure comes with monetary gratification and in some instances, sex is given freely with no morality attached.

It was in Lagos that I learned to eat bearded snails.
With my banana, I eat bearded snails. (164)

The above is a graphic description of the sexual act between a man and an unidentified sexual partner. Perhaps because pornography is brought to the mainstream in popular culture, it adds up to why the image of a woman's virginity is often cast into the open mode. So, a woman becomes a symbol of consolatory time and sexual engagement in postmodern societies viciously submerged in an unhealthy display of moral values defying cultural and spiritual realism.

In *26a*, Diana Evans typifies the impulse of our contemporary society to embrace transculturality. Throughout the novel, she exposes a shift in cultural norms and societal ethos as a result of popular culture. The narrative has literary significance because the story explicates the multiple consciousness atypical of a globalized youth. *26a* thrives on the personal and psychological struggles of members of a family as they attempt to find their identity. Psychic dislocation, an existential 'state of being, belonging and becoming' (Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza, 2005, p.1) has made youths adept at finding their identity with artistes in the different genres of popular culture. For instance, the addiction of Kemy Hunter to Michael Jackson, a pop musician is described thus:

Kemy was learning to walk on the moon. During her seven years of Michael Jackson worship she'd done everything a number one fan must do. The poster she'd had since she was five, the one of him in a black suit leaning against a wall with his hands in his lovely pockets was tatty now, brown at the edges, and it was rolled up under the bed. She'd replaced it with the *Thriller* poster, Michael in a red leather jacket with a werewolf behind him, clutching his shoulders. When she was eight, she'd written him a letter asking him to come over for apple pie and then take her to the Whimpy in Willesden for a burger. (*26a*, p.141)

Describing the adroitness of Kemy further, Evans avers further:

Kemy and Bessi had had many arguments recently over Michael. Kemy praised everything he did, every song. But Bessi, who now read music magazines, did not approve of the direction Michael had taken with his latest album, *Bad*. 'Thriller was much better', she argued. 'It has a much better concept.' (She read that in *Smash Hits*. But he's brilliant,' insisted Kemy. 'He's a genius and he can do anything he likes. So shut up!' (26a, p.142)

In a way, Evans presents the blind attachment of youngsters to popular music figures as the cause of the cultural dislocation that permeates society. Evans queries the insistence on adopting the model of a popular artist for fashion and music ideology. Bessi, Kemy's sister wonders why there is a blind attraction and desperation to see the music star. The most salient point about Evan's exploration of popular culture is the evidence of music and nightclubs which relatively deviate from the musical artistic creation in indigenous African societies. It is also worth mentioning here that there is competition for morality as images, symbols, and a wide range of vulgarities are circularised and proliferated.

To Adichie, Adelokun, and Evans, the basis for understanding the ferment of popular culture, even as expressed within the framework of postcolonialism is not to make clear the economic and social decay that permeates contemporary space, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms popular culture has taken by the dispersed, fragmented and disillusioned individuals already caught in the nest of transculturation. To this end, the resurgence of popular culture cannot be confined to popular media because of the teeming global youth population, literary spaces can be more easily negotiated because the effect of social practice should be spatialized rather than it been localized within some repressive grid of media content creators.

Conclusion

Adichie reinforces the idea that incessant migration in search for the proverbial golden-fleece which has become a popular culture among the working population in postcolonial societies is a result of political and socio-economic malaise. The underlying meaning and implication of this is that globalization

and transculturalism are emblematic of the transmuted imperialist strategy of hegemonic powers, in which there is the acculturation of negative cultural influence and linguistic vulgarism to counter the hegemonic influence of popular culture on the subalterns. In postcolonial literature, every contemporary narrative is an expression of popular culture. Hence, Adichie, Adelakun, and Evan's exposure to linguistic vulgarity and contextualization of popular culture is an attempt at self-redefinition for inferiority. By exploring the stories of Ifemezu and Obinze, Bathelomew and Auntie Uju, Adichie draws the reader's attention to a self-conscious multiracial nation where immigrants interrogate the politico-cultural structure of the Centre and the ideology of the fluidity of the global space. It, therefore, follows that the discourse of popular culture has gradually shifted from a closed hegemonic zone to an open liberal sphere, the space of cultural and political exegesis. Summarily, much of the vulgarism and anti-social behaviors, of street life and culture, as well as of popular culture practices, derive precisely from the infinitely varied texture and oppositions to conditions of hegemony after several decades of independence.

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