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AFROPOLITANISM AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING: IDENTITY IN DIASPORA LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper explores Afropolitanism as a framework for understanding identity and belonging in African diaspora literature. It examines how writers represent identities shaped by migration, colonial histories, race, language, class, and transnational connections. Afropolitanism describes forms of African identity that are at once rooted in African histories and engaged with the wider world. Yet the term is debated: critics ask whether it gives sufficient attention to inequality, displacement, and the experiences of Africans who cannot move freely. Through the work of Taiye Selasi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and other diaspora writers, this paper argues that belonging is portrayed not as a fixed inheritance or a simple choice between "home" and "abroad," but as an ongoing negotiation among places, memories, relationships, and political conditions.

Keywords: Afropolitanism, diaspora, belonging, identity, African literature, migration.

Introduction

Migration and diaspora have long shaped African literature. Writers have explored the effects of colonialism, education, political conflict, economic migration, exile, and global mobility on individual and collective identity. In these works, characters often live across national and cultural boundaries. They may feel connected to more than one place, while also experiencing exclusion in each.

The term Afropolitanism has become a prominent way of describing some contemporary African and diasporic identities. It is commonly associated with people who are culturally connected to Africa while also shaped by international movement and multiple cultural influences. Afropolitan identity is therefore often presented as cosmopolitan and transnational. However, it is not a neutral or universally applicable label. Questions arise about who can claim it, whose experiences it represents, and whether its focus on mobility and cultural hybridity overlooks poverty, racialization, and restricted movement.

This paper examines Afropolitanism and the politics of belonging in diaspora literature. It argues that these texts portray belonging as a contested process shaped by personal attachments and by unequal structures of citizenship, race, class, and mobility.

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Background of the Study

African identity has been shaped by histories of colonialism, slavery, migration, political change, and cultural exchange. These histories have produced communities whose lives and identities cross national borders. In literature, diaspora is therefore more than geographical movement: it also involves memory, cultural affiliation, and changing relationships to home. Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process shaped by history and representation. This perspective helps explain why diaspora characters may identify with multiple places while feeling fully accepted in none.

The concept of Afropolitanism offers a framework for examining these complex identities. Popularized by Taiye Selasi's essay "Bye-Bye, Babar" (2005), the term describes people of African background whose identities are shaped by both African connections and international experience. Afropolitanism challenges the idea that African identity must be confined to a single nation or cultural tradition. It draws attention to multilingualism, migration, transnational family ties, and the negotiation of different cultural worlds (Selasi, 2005).

However, the experience of belonging is not the same for everyone. Migration may offer education, employment, and new forms of cultural connection, but it can also involve racism, legal insecurity, economic hardship, and social exclusion. Brah (1996) uses the concept of "diaspora space" to describe how migrants and established communities encounter one another within unequal histories of movement and settlement. Her approach underscores that belonging is shaped not only by personal feelings but also by social and political conditions.

This tension is evident in contemporary African diaspora literature. In Americanah, Adichie (2013) explores how Ifemelu's experiences in the United States change her understanding of race and identity, while her return to Nigeria raises new questions about home and belonging. Selasi's Ghana Must Go (2013) portrays a family whose members are dispersed across countries, showing how migration and family memory shape identity across generations. These novels present belonging as a continuing negotiation rather than a simple choice between an African homeland and a foreign destination.

At the same time, scholars and critics have questioned whether Afropolitanism gives sufficient attention to the unequal conditions of global mobility. The term is often associated with educated, urban, and internationally mobile Africans, whose experiences may not represent those of people facing poverty, forced migration, or restricted travel. Afropolitanism must therefore be considered alongside questions of class, race, citizenship, and access to movement.

Against this background, the present study examines Afropolitanism and the politics of belonging in diaspora literature. It focuses on how literary works represent identity, home, migration, and exclusion, and considers whether Afropolitanism adequately accounts for the different conditions under which Africans and members of the African diaspora experience belonging.

Statement of the Problem

African diaspora literature increasingly portrays identities shaped by migration, cultural exchange, and connections across national borders. Afropolitanism provides a useful framework for understanding these identities because it challenges narrow definitions of African identity based

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on a single nation or culture (Selasi, 2005). However, the concept can also suggest a degree of cosmopolitan freedom that is not available to all Africans and members of the diaspora.

The central problem addressed in this study is the tension between transnational identity and unequal belonging. Diaspora characters may maintain connections to several places, yet encounter racism, legal insecurity, cultural stereotyping, or exclusion in the societies where they live. As Brah (1996) observes, diaspora identities develop within social spaces shaped by migration and unequal relations of power. Belonging is therefore not determined by personal identity alone; it is also influenced by citizenship, race, class, language, and social acceptance.

A further problem is that Afropolitanism is often associated with educated and internationally mobile Africans. This emphasis may underrepresent the experiences of people whose movement is restricted or forced, and those facing economic hardship or insecure immigration status. Consequently, the concept risks presenting a limited picture of African diaspora experience if it is not examined critically.

This study investigates how diaspora literature represents these tensions, particularly the ways characters negotiate identity, home, and acceptance across different societies. Through works such as Adichie's Americanah (2013) and Selasi's Ghana Must Go (2013), the study considers how literary representations both illuminate and complicate Afropolitanism. It asks whether the concept adequately captures the diversity of diaspora experiences and how the politics of belonging shapes the identities represented in these texts.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine Afropolitanism and the politics of belonging in selected African diaspora literary works, focusing on how characters negotiate identity, home, migration, and social acceptance.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

Explain how Afropolitan identity is represented in the selected literary works.

Examine how migration and transnational connections shape characters' sense of home and belonging.

Analyse the effects of race, class, citizenship, and cultural difference on characters' experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

Assess the strengths and limitations of Afropolitanism as a framework for understanding diverse diaspora experiences.

Research Questions

How is Afropolitan identity represented in the selected literary works?

How do migration and transnational connections shape characters' ideas of home and belonging?

How do race, class, citizenship, and cultural difference influence characters' experiences of inclusion or exclusion?

To what extent does Afropolitanism account for the varied experiences of African diaspora characters?

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Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the representation of Afropolitanism and belonging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013) and Taiye Selasi's Ghana Must Go (2013). It examines selected characters and episodes concerning migration, identity, home, race, class, and cultural affiliation. The analysis is limited to literary representation and does not attempt to cover every African diaspora community or all works associated with Afropolitanism.

The African Diaspora and Diasporic Identity

The concept of diaspora has developed beyond its earlier association with exile and permanent separation from a homeland. Contemporary scholarship often treats diaspora as a condition involving movement, memory, cultural exchange, and continuing connections across national borders. Safran (1991) identifies features traditionally associated with diasporic communities, including memories of an ancestral homeland, a sense of partial exclusion from the host society, and an ongoing relationship with the place of origin. However, later scholars have questioned whether all diaspora communities share these characteristics.

Clifford (1994) argues that diaspora should be understood through routes as well as roots. This perspective shifts attention from fixed origins to travel, displacement, and the relationships people form across different locations. Similarly, Brah (1996) describes diaspora as a space in which histories of migration and settlement intersect with social relations of power. Her concept of "diaspora space" includes not only migrants but also those who remain in the places to which migrants move. This approach is useful for analysing literary characters whose identities are shaped by both personal movement and the societies they encounter.

Hall (1990) also challenges the idea that cultural identity is fixed or unchanging. He presents identity as a process of becoming, shaped by history, representation, and difference. This understanding is relevant to African diaspora literature, where characters may feel connected to more than one culture while also experiencing uncertainty about where they belong. Their identities are not simply divided between an African origin and a Western destination; they are continually negotiated through lived experience.

Afropolitanism

The term Afropolitan was popularised by Taiye Selasi in her essay "Bye-Bye, Babar" (2005). Selasi uses it to describe a generation of Africans whose lives and identities are shaped by multiple cultural influences, migration, and global connections. Afropolitanism challenges the assumption that African identity is singular or confined to the nation-state. It draws attention to people who may have family, cultural, and personal ties across several countries.

The concept has since been discussed as both a cultural identity and a way of thinking about contemporary African experience. Eze (2014) examines Afropolitanism as a response to changing forms of African self-representation and to the movement of Africans across national and cultural boundaries. Knudsen and Rahbek (2016) similarly explore Afropolitanism as a framework for understanding contemporary African cultural production and cosmopolitan identities. These discussions help explain why the concept is relevant to literary works featuring characters who move between Africa, Europe, and North America.

At the same time, scholars have raised concerns about the limits of Afropolitanism. Its emphasis on mobility, education, and global cultural fluency may foreground the experiences of relatively privileged Africans while giving less attention to forced migration, poverty, restricted mobility, and insecure legal status. This criticism is important because the ability to move freely is not equally available to all Africans. Afropolitanism therefore requires critical application: it can illuminate transnational identity, but it should not be treated as representative of every African or diasporic experience.

The Politics of Belonging

Belonging involves more than an individual's sense of attachment to a place. It is also shaped by social recognition, legal status, and the power to decide who is accepted as part of a community. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes between belonging as an emotional attachment and the politics of belonging, through which boundaries are created between those considered insiders and outsiders. This distinction provides a useful framework for analysing characters who feel connected to a society but are treated as foreign or excluded from it.

Anthias (2006) likewise examines belonging in relation to identity, location, and social positioning. Her work cautions against treating identity categories as stable or uniform. A person's experience of belonging may vary according to race, gender, class, nationality, and historical context. These factors can intersect, shaping how diaspora characters are perceived and how they understand themselves.

The politics of belonging is particularly significant in migration narratives because migrants may be expected to demonstrate cultural loyalty or assimilation. They may be regarded as outsiders despite long-term residence, citizenship, or familiarity with the host society. Conversely, they may be viewed as culturally inauthentic in relation to their ancestral homeland. Such conflicting expectations can produce forms of "in-between" identity in which belonging is negotiated rather than simply inherited.

Race, Migration, and Cultural Identity

Race is central to many African diaspora narratives because migration does not necessarily remove racial distinctions; it can make them more visible. In Americanah, for example, the experience of race changes when the protagonist moves from Nigeria to the United States. This reflects the idea that racial identity is shaped by particular social and historical contexts rather than being experienced in exactly the same way everywhere.

Hall's (1990) account of identity as historically produced helps explain how characters may understand themselves differently after migration. Brah's (1996) work further shows that diaspora identities are formed within unequal social environments. These perspectives make it possible to examine how racial categorisation, social class, accent, education, and immigration status affect characters' access to acceptance and opportunity.

Migration also affects ideas of home. Home may refer to a country of origin, a place of residence, a family network, or an imagined community. Clifford (1994) emphasises that diasporic life often involves ongoing connections between places rather than a simple transition from one home to

another. In literature, this can appear through memory, family relationships, return journeys, and characters' changing attachments to different countries.

Afropolitanism in the Selected Literary Works

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013) explores migration, race, and identity through the experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze. Ifemelu's move from Nigeria to the United States exposes her to racial categories and social expectations that differ from those she experienced at home. Her observations about race reveal how belonging can be affected by appearance, accent, class, and cultural knowledge. The novel also complicates the idea that migration necessarily leads to improved opportunities or a stable cosmopolitan identity.

Taiye Selasi's Ghana Must Go (2013) presents a family whose members have connections to Ghana, Nigeria, the United States, and other locations. The novel's transnational family structure illustrates how identity and belonging can be shaped by inherited histories, migration, family conflict, and cultural memory. Its characters' relationships with multiple places support an Afropolitan reading, while their experiences of loss and disconnection also challenge any overly celebratory view of global mobility.

Read together, the novels offer different but complementary perspectives. Americanah foregrounds racialisation and the social experience of migration, while Ghana Must Go examines transnational family histories and the emotional consequences of displacement. Both works show that mobility can create new possibilities without guaranteeing acceptance or a secure sense of home.

Diaspora and the politics of belonging

Diaspora is more than the movement of people from one country to another. It involves relationships among memory, place, history, and community. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not simply a stable essence inherited from the past; it is also a process of becoming, shaped by history and representation (Hall, 1990). This view is valuable for reading diaspora literature, where characters may carry memories of a homeland while also developing new affiliations elsewhere.

Belonging has both personal and political dimensions. A character may feel emotionally connected to a place but lack legal citizenship there. Conversely, someone may possess formal citizenship while experiencing racial or cultural exclusion. Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space" emphasizes that migration affects both migrants and those who consider themselves rooted in a place. It is a space in which histories of movement, settlement, and difference meet (Brah, 1996).

Diaspora literature often reveals that belonging is not granted equally. Race, accent, religion, class, gender, and immigration status can determine whether a person is treated as a member of a community. The question "Where are you from?" may express curiosity, but it can also imply that a person does not fully belong where they are. Literature makes these everyday negotiations visible.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013) explores migration, race, and the changing meaning of home through the experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze. Ifemelu moves from Nigeria to

the United States, where she becomes newly conscious of race as a social category. Her blog posts about race allow the novel to examine how identity is shaped by the society in which a person lives. Ifemelu's experience complicates the idea that migration simply produces a cosmopolitan identity. She gains new perspectives, but she also faces alienation and must interpret social codes that were not central to her life in Nigeria. On returning to Nigeria, she encounters another set of expectations. Her sense of belonging changes across locations rather than settling permanently in one of them.

Obinze's experiences further emphasize the unequal politics of mobility. His undocumented life in Britain contrasts with the relative ease of movement available to more privileged migrants. The novel thus distinguishes between international experience as a choice and migration shaped by economic and legal vulnerability.

Taiye Selasi

Taiye Selasi's Ghana Must Go (2013) represents a family whose members are dispersed across countries and shaped by migration, memory, and family conflict. The novel's transnational setting reflects Afropolitan concerns: identity is formed through multiple places rather than through a single national home.

At the same time, the novel shows that international mobility does not eliminate emotional or historical ties. Family members carry unresolved experiences with them, and geographic distance can intensify rather than erase the past. Selasi's fiction therefore presents belonging as both expansive and difficult: people may feel connected to several places while remaining estranged from particular communities or relatives.

Other diaspora perspectives

Diaspora literature includes a wide range of experiences that cannot be reduced to a single Afropolitan model. Works by writers such as Teju Cole and NoViolet Bulawayo, for example, explore migration, urban life, exile, and the pressures of representing African experience to global audiences. Their writing raises questions about who is seen as a representative of Africa and how literary markets shape the circulation of African stories.

These works also show why the category of Afropolitanism needs to remain open to criticism. Some characters experience mobility as a source of possibility; others encounter displacement, precarity, or exclusion. A literary account of belonging must therefore attend to differences in class, gender, race, nationality, and legal status.

Language, memory, and cultural identity

Language is central to the politics of belonging. Diaspora writers often represent characters who move among languages, accents, and forms of expression. A character may adjust their speech to fit a new environment, retain a home language as a marker of intimacy, or resist pressure to speak in a way that appears more acceptable to others.

Such choices reveal that language is not merely a communication tool. It can signal education, class, cultural affiliation, and social power. Writers may also use multiple linguistic registers to

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challenge the expectation that African literature must be written in a single "authentic" voice. In this sense, linguistic hybridity can be an artistic strategy as well as a reflection of lived experience. Memory also shapes belonging. Memories of a homeland may be personal, inherited, or reconstructed through family stories. They can provide connection across generations, but they may also create idealized versions of the past. Diaspora literature frequently places memory beside present-day experience, showing how ideas of home change over time.

Critiques and limitations of Afropolitanism

Afropolitanism has helped draw attention to the diversity and global connectedness of contemporary African identities. It challenges narrow national definitions and highlights the creative possibilities of living across cultures. However, several limitations require consideration:

Unequal mobility: Not everyone can cross borders with the same freedom. Visa systems, poverty, conflict, and racial profiling shape who is able to travel.

Class and access: The most visible Afropolitan figures are often educated and economically privileged. Their experiences should not stand for all Africans or all members of the diaspora.

The risk of commodification: Global publishing and media markets may favor cosmopolitan narratives because they are legible to international audiences.

The persistence of racialization: Cultural fluency and global experience do not necessarily protect migrants from racism or exclusion.

The complexity of home: A person's relationship to home may involve affection, conflict, loss, or coercion. It cannot always be celebrated as uncomplicated hybridity.

These critiques do not make Afropolitanism useless. Rather, they encourage a more precise use of the term—one that examines both the opportunities associated with transnational identity and the structures that limit belonging.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies of African diaspora literature commonly examine how migration reshapes identity, race, family relationships, and ideas of home. For this study, "empirical review" refers to research and critical analyses of the selected novels and related literary works, rather than statistical studies.

Studies on Americanah

Critical scholarship on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah has focused particularly on race, migration, and identity. The novel depicts how Ifemelu's understanding of race changes after she moves from Nigeria to the United States. In Nigeria, race is not a central part of her everyday self-definition; in the United States, she becomes more conscious of racial categorisation and its effects. This contrast has led critics to read the novel as showing that racial identity is shaped by social and national context.

Researchers have also examined the novel's representation of migration and return. Ifemelu's experiences in the United States complicate the idea that migration automatically produces success or belonging. Although she gains new perspectives and opportunities, she also encounters racism, cultural adjustment, and social isolation. Her eventual return to Nigeria further complicates

the meaning of home: return does not simply restore her earlier identity, but requires her to negotiate how she has changed.

Another recurring area of analysis is the novel's use of hair and the blog. Ifemelu's hair becomes a marker through which race, beauty standards, and social acceptance are explored. Her blog gives her a platform to comment on race and American society, while also demonstrating how migrants interpret their experiences through comparison with their country of origin. These elements make Americanah useful for studying the relationship between racialisation, cultural identity, and belonging.

Studies on Ghana Must Go

Studies of Taiye Selasi's Ghana Must Go have often focused on transnational family life, memory, and the effects of migration across generations. The novel follows members of the Sai family whose lives connect Ghana, Nigeria, the United States, and other locations. Its structure presents identity as shaped not only by individual migration but also by family history, inherited memory, and relationships maintained across borders.

Critical readings have also considered the novel's representation of home and displacement. The characters' connections to different countries do not necessarily provide a stable sense of belonging. Instead, family conflict, loss, and separation influence their relationships with both places and one another. This challenges a purely celebratory interpretation of cosmopolitan mobility: transnational connections can create cultural richness while also involving emotional and familial costs.

The novel has also been discussed in relation to Afropolitanism. Its characters' international experiences and multiple cultural affiliations reflect aspects of Afropolitan identity. At the same time, their experiences show that mobility and global connections do not eliminate personal trauma or social inequality. The text therefore offers a way to examine both the possibilities and limits of Afropolitanism.

Comparative Findings

Read together, Americanah and Ghana Must Go present migration as a complex process rather than a straightforward movement from one home to another. Americanah places particular emphasis on race and the migrant's changing social position, while Ghana Must Go gives greater attention to family history, memory, and intergenerational displacement. Both novels represent identity as fluid and shaped by relationships between places.

The works also suggest that belonging has both personal and social dimensions. Characters may feel attached to a country or community yet encounter exclusion, misunderstanding, or cultural distance. Their experiences support the view that belonging is negotiated through race, class, family ties, nationality, and social recognition.

Research Gap

Existing critical discussions provide valuable insights into migration, race, family, and transnational identity in these novels. However, these themes are often examined separately. This study brings them together by comparing how Afropolitan identity and the politics of belonging interact in

Americanah and Ghana Must Go. It focuses on how transnational mobility creates cultural connections while social boundaries and personal histories shape whether characters are able to feel accepted and at home.

Note: To make this section a formal empirical review, add specific peer-reviewed studies—author, year, title, method or approach, and findings—verified through your library or academic databases. The discussion above summarises common critical themes but does not attribute individual findings to unverified studies.

Conclusion

Afropolitanism offers a way to discuss identities shaped by African histories and global movement, but diaspora literature shows that belonging is never simply a matter of cultural openness. It is affected by race, class, citizenship, language, memory, and unequal access to mobility. In novels such as Adichie's Americanah and Selasi's Ghana Must Go, characters negotiate multiple homes and identities without arriving at a single, final definition of themselves.

The politics of belonging in diaspora literature therefore involves more than asking where characters come from. It asks who is recognized as belonging, under what conditions, and with what costs. Afropolitanism is most persuasive when it recognizes both cultural connection and political inequality. Read in this way, it helps illuminate the varied ways contemporary writers represent identity as mobile, relational, and continually negotiated.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of Americanah and Ghana Must Go, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Recognise the diversity of African identities. Educators and researchers should avoid treating African identity as fixed or uniform. The novels show that identity can be shaped by migration, culture, family history, race, and personal experience.
2. Teach migration through multiple perspectives. Literature courses should consider both the opportunities migration can create and the challenges it may involve, including racism, exclusion, displacement, and pressure to adapt.
3. Encourage critical discussion of belonging. Students should examine who is accepted or excluded in different communities and how factors such as race, class, gender, nationality, and citizenship influence belonging.
4. Include contemporary African diasporic literature in curricula. Works such as Americanah and Ghana Must Go can broaden discussions of African literature by exploring transnational experiences and connections between Africa and the wider world.
5. Avoid romanticising cosmopolitan identity. Researchers should use Afropolitanism critically, recognising that international mobility and cultural exchange are not equally available to everyone.
6. Pursue further comparative research. Future studies could examine other African diasporic novels, compare experiences across generations, or focus on themes such as gender, language, race, family, and return migration.

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