



MIGRANT MELANCHOLIA IN *BY THE SEA* AND *AMERICANAH*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This research examines melancholia and disidentifications in the Postcolonial migrants live in Abdul Razak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). The theoretical underpinning of this study is based on Paul Gilroy's *Post-Colonial Melancholia* (2013) and José Esteban Muñoz *Disidentifications* (1999). The research negotiates the ways both authors have weaved the layers of deep anguish from betrayal, colonial history and exile in the struggle of Saleh Omar to secure asylum. In the First Primary text *By the Sea*, Omar's Silence before the immigration officers transform his melancholia from individual to political when coupled with the history of empire. In the second Primary text *Americanah*, Ifemelu's blogs writing are the examples of ironic explanation for the American racial structure that neither submit to the rules nor denies them but transforms them into a subject of resistance rather self-governing. This research is a significant and original contribution to the existing studies in Postcolonial American and African literature particularly focusing on exile, race and hybridity in both of the primary texts. It further addresses the gap in colonization and melancholy ethnography that explores disidentifications and exile without the lens of melancholia. The main argument of this research is that the migrant experience is framed not only by loss but by the creative ways of enduring such loss.

Keywords: *Disidentifications, Displacement, Exile, Migration, Postcolonial Melancholia.*

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1. Introduction

In postcolonial literature, it is often migration accompanying exile that features most prominently. This is the case for Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea* (2001) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), which examine complex layers of identity, memory and the relics of colonialism through the intertwined experiences of their characters. Analysis of the two texts together reveals the world of migration creates a duality of existence, a duality of comfort and anguish. There is a paradox of self that is achieved, yet becomes shattered and discarded. With reference to Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*, it is possible to surmise that both authors illuminate the emotional legacies of migrants in an attempt to explain their identity constructions in an inequitable, racially stratified world.

In *By The Sea* (2001), Abdulrazak Gurnah presents the case of Saleh Omar, a Zanzibari exile, now aged refugee, sixty-five years of age, as he travels toward England to seek asylum. He becomes a focal point for Gurnah, an anchor for the complex web of enquiries into the themes of exile, memory, and belonging. Omar's reasons for exile, which are scarce, seem to oscillate within the parameters of a circle between the island of Zanzibar, where the protagonist was born, and England, which serves as his new home. Once a wealthy proprietor of a furniture shop, Omar was unable to continue practicing his trade because of the betrayal of Hussein, a slimy politician eager to profit from the political pandemonium in the newly independent Zanzibar. The property in question was lost to the war, whereby the bank's deadline to pay off the loan was accumulated with other banks and owned by the state.

Gurnah has a deep understanding of the injustices imposed by colonial regimes and the consequences which arise in the period after a war. His family was lost in Zanzibar. In the UK, he encounters another exile, Latif Mahmud. Their destinies soon get intertwined. Gurnah uses first person narrative to enable Omar and Latif to share their story together. The rich imagination and details Gurnah uses helps capture the confusion that exists between memory and history and how the present is shaped by the past, as well. Gurnah intersperses these silences to highlight the silences that linger after the act of migration. These sentiments are guilt and nostalgia coupled with the deep silence that persists. Through sadness and violence, the life of Omar becomes a prime example of the manner in which a migrant carries the dangerously porous mental burden of an empire on his shoulders. The book examines migration through the dual lenses of a psychologically induced state and a cellular experience, intertwining personal narratives with a shared tapestry of historical trauma. Gurnah's *By The Sea* is an investigation into the art of lived narrative, and the empathy and memory that accompany it. It shows how one can transform loss into a source of enduring strength and resilience in the face of exile: "Remembering differently, rather than forgetting, is what heals" (Gurnah 211). This is arguably the book's

overarching motif; remembering is an act of suffering, yet it is in the most profound manner, an act of healing and rebuilding one's identity. Gurnah describes exile as a deeply emotional and political state of being, where self-recovery and survival can be aided through storytelling, memory, and silence. By doing so, *By The Sea* expands on the outlook of migration as a psychological odyssey of tenacity, fantasy, and craving for inclusion as much as a socio-historical plight.

In her 2013 book *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie focuses on issues concerning immigration, identity, life and love through the experience of Ifemelu. The book demonstrates the consequences of migrating to another country and how much self-perception undergoes a change, including how immigrants try to cope with the estrangement of their identity and homes. At the particular chapter of her life where the book begins, Ifemelu has been residing for quite a long period of time in Princeton, New Jersey. Ifemelu spent her childhood in Nigeria, where she was an intelligent, confident girl. She was deeply in love with Obinze, a gentle and dreamy boy with a desire to travel abroad. Both of them, like many young people of their age, had dreams of motivational, futuristic, positive outcomes that lay beyond the borders of their home country. Strikes lead to the suspension of Ifemelu's education in Nigerian universities while Obinze moves to the United Kingdom. The first indicator of how migration divides lives and connections for practically every case is the separation.

Upon arriving in America, Ifemelu faces numerous challenges. The moment she steps foot in America, Ifemelu comes to grips with the reality of race and acknowledges the fact that people start formulating ideas about her upon noticing her skin. Ifemelu's experiences as an immigrant in America highlights the constructs of racism in society. While Ifemelu is building her life in America, the U.K. is the setting for Obinze's story. Unlike his intention to be with her in the U.S., he is almost immediately denied a visa. While living in London illegally, In order to get the job, he assumes a fake identity. His life turns into an endless fight for survival as he continues to be tormented and disgraced at the same time. When he is caught, he is sent to the prison and then deported to Nigeria. Adichie writes that Obinze "felt like a small man whose life was slipping away from him.". When he and Ifemelu reunite, it becomes evident that both of them had to undergo changes as a result of migration.

The novel describes Ifemelu's coming back to Nigeria as part of her expectations. Considering her time spent in the U.S.A., she was supposed to feel "at home". Still, she admits to her own change." In Lagos, she is at times called "*Americanah*," which in the book refers to Nigerians who return home with strange ways and accents. This term highlights the attempts to illustrate the state of being between two worlds as a result of immigration. Ifemelu feels she does not belong entirely to either of those places anymore. Ifemelu's equally melancholic, nostalgic and remorseful disposition demonstrates how

people in her circumstances carry the burden of loss and the hope of new beginnings. Such a life is an exhibition of the undeniable traces of a colonial past that, to this day, persist in the world. In Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, "migrants carry the unfinished business of empire" (Gilroy 98). Ifemelu's return to Nigeria is an attempt to reconnect with her roots and her identity.

Adichie, in *Americanah*, shows that migration is associated with both loss and freedom. Adichie, through Ifemelu and Obinze, illustrates migration as a deeply corporeal and psychological phenomenon. The quotation of the two novels serves the purpose of illustrating the differences and the commonalities. *By The Sea* illustrates the asylum seekers melancholic condition through silence, exile, and betrayal, while *Americanah* focuses on how disidentifications enable diasporic individuals to navigate race and identity in the West without complete assimilation. Both novels suggest that migration is not a rupture from the past; it is laden with history, colonialism and unresolved sorrow. This research, in linking melancholia with disidentifications, illustrates that the condition of the migrant in postcolonial fiction is one of profound loss and inventive means of survival.

1.1. Research Statement

This study attempts a comparative analysis of the works *By The Sea* and *Americanah*, considering the condition of postcolonial melancholia and a misidentifications strategy as a form of unresolved loss of a colonial betrayal and exile which a migrant is subjected to. It posits that melancholia and disidentifications are not opposed but rather complex forms of reacting to dislocation.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How do the novels illustrate postcolonial melancholia as an attachment to histories of loss and displacement that remain ungrieved?
2. In what ways do the characters utilize disidentifications to maneuver through exclusionary racial and cultural frameworks?
3. How does melancholia and disidentifications negotiate for the representation of postcolonial migrant identity?

1.3. Significance of the Study

What makes this research unique is how it tackles Gurnah's *By The Sea* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the lens of Paul Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia and José Esteban Muñoz's disidentifications framework. While there has been a plethora of analyses on both texts regarding the migration, exile, hybridity and race, few have explored the integration of melancholia and disidentifications and the meaning it constructs for diasporic individuals. As Gilroy puts it: "the legacy of empire is not over but reconfigured in the present" (Gilroy 111). This is something that truly engages Saleh Omar's asylum seeking in *By The Sea* and Ifemelu's sense of Otherness in *Americanah*. Likewise, there is the way Muñoz explains that survival is "often achieved through the

most imaginative of means” (Muñoz 12). This fills this gap in postcolonial literary criticism through the use of fiction in portraying the psychological effects of exile, and the ever-present, and at times dire, imaginative and desperate measures that migrants have to take to survive

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical approach for this research includes Paul Gilroy's Postcolonial Melancholia along with José Esteban Muñoz's disidentifications, both of which discuss the consequences of colonialism, racism and cultural dislocation. Alongside the concepts noted, they represent the primary structural framework for the critical analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, which address postcolonial migration, exile and identity. This work aims to illustrate the emotional, sociological and psychological realities of the displaced in relation to the enduring consequences of colonialism, race, and the sense of belonging.

Postcolonial melancholia, as developed by Paul Gilroy, was inspired by his earlier work *The Black Atlantic* published in 1993, focuses on the cultural transnational identities constructed as a result of slavery and migration. In his 2005 *Postcolonial Melancholia*, the author continues to develop and elaborate on the ideas contained in *The Black Atlantic*, particularly dealing with the postimperial state citizens' psychology and ethics. Gilroy states that “The legacy of empire is not over, but reconfigured in the present” (Gilroy 111), and he explains that melancholia is a sadness associated with and the profound loss of an empire that is unprocessed, unresolved and unacknowledged.

Instead of reconciling with their violent past which one may reasonably argue carries some level of shame associated with it, a country like Britain will ‘unprocessed’ and ‘grieve’ their loss of prestige and authority upon migrants and racialized others. He notes that melancholic conditions ‘arise in the empire’s loss of prestige and authority and the inability to work through it’ (Gilroy 98). Postcolonial melancholia is far more complex than a ‘collection’ of memories of an empire; it is a failure to contend with the ethical wounds that have been left untended. This denial takes the form of thin, but somehow persistent and almost hostile feelings towards migrants and the impoverished, who become the surrogates for the repressed memories of the empire. Gurnah’s *By The Sea* (2001), among other things, describes Saleh Omar’s story and him being a Zanzibar refugee and the postcolonial sadness it brings which brings the theory to life details in depth. He echoes Gilroy’s postcolonial melancholia in, “They treated me as if I was nobody, as if I had no face, and no history.” Omar’s encounters with the immigration officers, who scrub and sanitize his life, speaks of a particular kind of censorship. The sense of ‘utter silencing’ is a type of silencing which a colonized individual can rarely exercise. The case of Omar and his form of silencing is one of active refusal. A refusal to the deal with the organization,

posture and social optics which is centered on abolishing the existence of such a life as Omar's.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) focuses on the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze, two Nigerians, and how each's personal story abroad showcases the enduring impact of colonialism on the contemporary world's understanding of race and identity. To Ifemelu, the experience of coming to America is a journey to great a revelation: "You know America has made you black" (Adichie 273). To "race" someone is to deny them the context of their history and to dispose of them in the colonially consolidated racial order. Ifemelu's speech and Omar's silence illustrate the different ways of responding to the same historical moment. Despite, Adichie and Gilroy's melancholia, which claimed, and crafted paradox revisions, remain interconnected through and cross expressions. Gilroy's idea of conviviality gets further developed by Adichie through the examination of cross-racial, cross-national, and cross-class relations. The resonance of Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia for identity and migration is evident, too, in *By The Sea* and *Americanah*. Melancholia is a condition more complex than being simply sad. The characters in both of the novels, through empathy, storytelling, and self-expression, break the melancholic silence that is characteristic of the empire by changing grief to understanding and alienation to solidarity. To Ifemelu, this melancholia appears as alienation and silence, and unlike Omar, she does take the road of articulation. Ifemelu's political and performative blogging goes beyond the digitized stage. In every monologue she presents, she becomes a behavioral construct that articulates the paradoxes of a self-praising, diverse and inclusive society that otherizes and marginalizes as a principle. The self-contradictory, satirical and cynical tone of Gilroy's postcolonial melancholic contradictions are the very thin violins that Adichie's *Americanah* plays.

José Esteban Muñoz advanced the concept of disidentifications in the book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). The concept is useful when looking at the experiences of people such as Ifemelu and Omar who are on the societal margins. In processes of disidentifications, the person does not simply join or oppose the maternal discourses, but works to revise them from within. This concept reconciles the dualism of compliance and defiance. While Muñoz operates within the performance studies and queer theory, he aims to broaden them to include issues of race and migration. In regard to dominant forms of power, disidentifications is neither denial nor mimicry. Examining Gurnah's *By The Sea* within this context reveals the symbols of disidentifications at work through Saleh Omar's transition from silence to narrative. Omar's early silence which seems, at a first glance, to be passive is in fact an act of muted resistance. Here his silence is disobedience, not submission. Ifemelu's disentanglement activism in *Americanah* though is much more visceral and public during Ifemelu's engagement with race and cross-cultural interactions in the United States. Rather than a

full adoption and submission to American ideals, or a complete and utter rejection, she re-imagines and reframes American ideals through the lens of her blog. Every single post is a muse, a space where she performs a miniature act of disidentifications. With the help of irony and humor, she performs what Muñoz calls 'tricking the dominant culture by folding it back on itself' (Muñoz 97). Deportation doesn't erase Obinze's aspiration of improving his life, it shifts the focus of his aspirations to generating meaning on his own terms. Like that of Omar and Ifemelu, his story demonstrates the ability to pivot and 'post colonially' bend, reinterpret, and resist through the delicate dismantling of self-making as a survival tactic. Gurnah and Adichie's treatment of identity in *Americanah* and *By The Sea*, both reveal it as a fluid phenomenon. Their protagonists partake in identity politics that transcend the binaries of belonging and not belonging, visibility and invisibility, and assimilation and rejection. Munoz states that 'the act of disidentifications is not a one-time gesture, but a perpetual form of resistance' (12).

This study focuses mainly on the texts and the interpretive qualitative method has been employed. With works such as Memory, Identity, Trauma, and Belonging, the qualitative paradigm best describes the meaning constructed through language, imagery, and narrative. Examining literature is a deeply emotional endeavor. The qualitative methodology is particularly illustrative of the idea that literature is a site of translation, literature changes suffering to story and displacement to contemplation. The analysis depicts the relations on *By The Sea* and *Americanah* and personal memories to collective memories along and how primary conceptual frameworks and experience contextualize theory. The goal is not merely to apply theory to the text, but to show how theory is revived in the literature's power to feel, remember and dream the many scars of the empire.

3. Literature Review

In her essay *Americanah* and 'Adichie' quoting Waleed Ali, "Double and Triple Consciousness In..." deals with the challenging concerns of identity construction and the identity of the black, and most importantly of any female, diaspora in the West, which is problematized in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Ali draws on W. E. B. Du Bois 'double consciousness' in relation to how black people in America spend the entire life trying to see themselves from the other side of the mirror. She uses 'triple consciousness' which is coined by black feminist scholars to describe the overlapping dominances of race, gender and class in the life of a black woman. Her work is a critical assessment the emotional turmoil of Ifemelu and Obinze in trying to strike a balance between Africa and West, which has drawn from the context of Ali.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's speech, the character's altering hair styles, bungalows show how she operates and copes without complete assimilation. The irony and humor used are forms of self-complexation such as identity does not resolve but instead, in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea*, is in constant flux. In the peace and memory of Saleh

Omar, the trauma of 'shifting' is experienced as home and homeplace. Both people are situated in an 'ambivalent' condition, caught in the pendulum of belonging and alienation, and the extension of time. Within this paper, I will attempt to explain how migration identity is formed not only due to external elements as racism and class, but also deep inner emotions such as wish, shame, and nostalgia. This study also applies an intellectual and psychological perspective to migration and uses Gilroy's concept of melancholia to elucidate Ifemelu and Saleh Omar's profound sadness concerning some memories. This study stems from Ali's claim that migration goes beyond geo-cultural adjustment to include the movement of emotional recollections that change people's self-identity. It argues that in postcolonial migration identity becomes cancellable and restorable in an ongoing process of negotiation and redefinition through the lenses of melancholia and disidentifications. Both *Americanah* and *By The Sea* are instances that illustrate the idea that migrants are not solely defined by what they lose; instead, their valuation is determined by what they construct from their grief. In the sociological structure of Paul Griol's postcolonial melancholia, I examine emotional scars of colonial history and how they continue to affect the lives of migrants.

In Susana Luisa Costa Otero's "*An Immigrant Black Woman in America: An Intersectional Analysis of Adichie's Americanah*," Otero examines the case of discrimination in America sat in the novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, regarding the character of Ifemelu. Otero analyses Ifemelu's case using the intersectional approach with race, class, and gender. Otero's thesis examines the historical Afro, American connections tackling the colonial disorder and the slave trade which imposed the sociopolitical inequalities and oppression structures among Black people and which are still present today. This also includes the discussion of Afropolitanism where the younger class of African immigrants' experience multiculturalism appreciation and alienation. Otero also argues, along with many others, that Ifemelu faces the unique case of triple oppression at the hands of a patriarchal and capitalist society, being a black, working-class, and almost the only woman in a white-dominated society. Otero discusses the issues that Nigerian people face in the issues in the departments of appearance, love, and work. Ifemelu, for instance, identifies herself as a black woman with Westernized beauty, and as a result, faces discrimination in the workplace and other social spheres which leads her to the consciousness of self-acceptance and self-advocacy.

This study employs Muñoz's idea on disidentifications to show how such people turn pain into power and creativity. Ifemelu writes in a self-reflexive way, whereas Saleh seeks to console and empower himself through the aloof narration. The works of such people aid them in the re-formation of their identities and the creation of new self-placement techniques. From these texts, it is clear that movement and migration are complex; they concern more than just a sociological approach, but also focus on

psychological fortitude and surviving. With respect to Otero, Gilroy, and Muñoz, these studies show that migration, too, involves an outward struggle for survival and an inward journey to self-healing and self-discovery. This juxtaposition of pain, memories, loss, and the yearning for home is why these stories stand out. It emerges from struggle, resilience, and the capacity to empathize with suffering, transforming it into profound understanding.

In the 2024 publication, *“Intertextuality in the Novel By the Sea Abdulrazak Gurnah,”* Sadullayeva and Uralova analyze the texts and historical writings that comprise Gurnah’s works. Sadullayeva and Uralova clarify that, “This article aims to explore the intricate intertextual references within Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel ‘By the Sea,’ examining how these references enrich the narrative and deepen readers' engagement with the text” (Kizi & Akhrovna, p. 613). These authors utilize the concept of intertextuality, which is the observation of relationships between texts. This article discusses the colonial maps and documents of Zanzibar that enable Europeans to dominate land and people, which is the history that the novel portrays in the background of Saleh Omar’s life. It argues that these documents do not maintain a neutral position: they construct and delimit membership, and Saleh, among others, is rendered a stranger in his own land. Furthermore, the article mentions that Gurnah incorporates A Thousand and One Nights and Islamic Literature, Miraj, to portray the journey of Saleh with some spirituality and mythology.

They examined associations with Homer’s Odyssey and Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”. The expression “I would prefer not to” demonstrates to some extent the discomfort of compliance and the unwillingness to obey. And Swahili proverbs, oral traditions, and a broken, shifting narrative style, about which the authors are reminiscent of modernists like Woolf and Joyce, also used to convey the complexity of exile, crisis of identity, and the aftermath of colonialism to a component elaborately, are intertexts. The authors also note, “Intertextuality, a term coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, refers to ‘the sum of relationships between and among writings’ and covers ‘the range of ways in which one text may respond to, allude to, derive from, mimic, or adapt another’” (614), which best illustrates the perspective from which the authors are writing.

Comparing this text with my research on the melancholia of migrants and disidentifications in By the Sea and Americanah shows the depth of this work. I engage the research of Paul Gilroy concerning postcolonial melancholia, as well as that of Jose Esteban Muñoz on disidentification, to determine how migrants carry the emotional surpluses of empire and racism constellated and try to live with and against these forces. Sadullayeva and Uralova demonstrate to me how the emotional and political burden is inscribed in the very form and allusions of By the Sea. The colonial maps and school histories the authors use in support of Gilroy help to argue that empire does not leave the stage after a formal political cessation, but continues to commandeer memory, identity and the quotidian. The article provides my study with a strong foundation for my argument

that the melancholia and employed strategies of disidentification, as presented in *By the Sea*, are embedded not only in the actions and dialogues of the characters, but more richly, ensconced in the matrix of allusions and artifacts of the narrative structure rather twisting the characters in the story.

Anyone has barely tried looking at Gurnah's techniques in juxtaposition with Adichie's *Americanah* that focuses on blogs, social media, hair salons, and transnational love as central places where one can examine race, migration, and belonging. With Sadullayeva and Uralova's work on intertextuality as my launching point and the *Americanah* novel as a pair with *By the Sea*, my work seeks to fill this gap. I posit that intertextuality, silence, and narrative voice in these works, especially in Gurnah's, are not simply aesthetic choices but primary vehicles for the expression of melancholy and disidentification of the migrant, as well as the conception of a fragile and alternative sense of belonging that is still formed in the shadow of colonial and racial disordering. This is something that, I posit, goes well beyond the main arguments of their article.

4. Analysis

Both *By The Sea* and *Americanah* show postcolonial melancholia as a strong attachment to losses that have never been properly mourned, so that the past constantly presses into the present. Omar opens Gurnah's novel by saying "it is so different here that it seems as if one life has ended and I am now living another one," but at once admits that "the earlier one teems and pulses in rude good health behind me and before me" (Gurnah 8). Ifemelu's American life is similarly shadowed by what she calls the "cement in her soul," a "bleakness and border lessness" that stays with her even when she has a fellowship, a loving partner and a successful blog (Adichie 13). Paul Gilroy's idea of "postcolonial melancholia" names this condition, in which imperial histories are not resolved and so contemporary Europe and its former colonies are haunted by an unworked through past (Gilroy 46). This melancholia appears not only as sadness but as a new way of seeing, especially in relation to the racialized body. When Ifemelu first arrives in the United States, she learns that "fat" is not a neutral description but a word "heaving with moral judgment like 'stupid' or 'bastard,'" and she carefully removes it from her vocabulary (Adichie 13). Years later, a stranger in a supermarket calls her "fat people," and the word comes back as a violent naming: "She was fat. She said the word 'fat' slowly, funneling it back and forward," and suddenly realizes how her body has been read and misread in America (Adichie 13). Ifemelu's melancholic self-scrutiny shows how Black women's bodies are made to carry other people's discomfort and her blog grows out of being stuck, turning bodily hurt into critical narration.

In *By The Sea*, melancholia takes shape around the colonial museum and the modern border. At the airport, Omar silently addresses the immigration officer: "Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her... I am fragile and precious too,

a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so now you'd better take me too. I joke; I joke" (Gurnah 17). He adds, "I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words" (Gurnah 17). His bitter joke links his body to the "endless catalogue of objects that were taken away to Europe because they were too fragile and delicate to be left in the clumsy and careless hands of natives" (Gurnah 17). Both novels therefore explore melancholia through the question of "home," which appears as both an impossible return and a deeply felt place. After years in the United States, Ifemelu obsessively reads Nigerian websites and blogs about young returnees. Omar, writing from his English seaside town, insists that the earlier life he left still "teems and pulses" around him (Gurnah 8). Avatar Brah writes that, for diasporic subjects, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination... a place of no return," even as home is also "the lived experience of a locality" in the present (Brah 192). Ifemelu's and Omar's longings show that melancholia is not a simple failure to move on but the normal emotional condition of people whose attachments are stretched between a mythic elsewhere and a fragile here. At the same time, melancholia is not only an inward mood; it is also a political register that reveals how present-day migration policies repeat colonial patterns. Omar's humiliating interrogation at the airport echoes British policies designed to create a "hostile environment" for people without regular status policies that, as the Windrush scandal showed, have wrongly targeted long-term residents whose lives were shaped by empire. Similarly, Ifemelu's insecure jobs, visa worries and racial discrimination in housing and employment reflect wider debates about "irregular migration" and the criminalization of movement that make routes across the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden or the U.S. Mexico border deadly for those fleeing crises. By tying these global structures of control to the everyday feelings of tiredness, shame and longing, the novels insist that contemporary migration politics must be understood through the emotional afterlife of colonial history. Importantly, melancholia in *By The Sea* and *Americanah* is not only paralyzing; it also becomes the ground from which characters invent small, subversive ways of living what this project calls disidentification. When the supermarket insult reduces Ifemelu to a "fat person," she immediately thinks, "This will be a perfect blog post," and imagines filing it under "race, gender and body size" (Adichie 13). She neither simply accepts the insult nor pretends that the category "fat" is harmless; instead, she takes over the classificatory language of U.S. liberal discourse, using its tags and idioms while revealing their violence. Omar, facing the border officer, stays silent rather than openly confronting him, but later rewrites the scene with sharp humor: he "jokes" about being a fragile colonial object and carefully records the officer's speech (Gurnah 17). Their responses are not straightforward resistance or full assimilation; they sit in between. José Esteban Muñoz gives a useful term for such practices when he defines disidentification as a "strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within," a way of dealing with dominant ideology that "neither opts to

assimilate... nor strictly opposes it,” but instead “tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form” (Muñoz 24). When melancholia and disidentifications are read together, the novels offer a model of postcolonial migrant identity that refuses to separate trauma and agency. Ifemelu’s final decision to leave her American life and return to Lagos is not presented as a neat cure for homesickness or as proof that the immigrant dream has failed; it grows from the “piercing homesickness” that has built up over years and from the critical habit she has formed of seeing American racial life from a distance (Adichie 14). Omar’s slow, uncertain life in *By The Sea* never becomes full belonging, yet his writing turns that ongoing state into ethical witness, keeping alive the memory of violence in Zanzibar and the daily humiliations of the British asylum system (Gurnah 8, 17). In both cases, attachments to ungrieved losses are not only pathological; they also make possible new kinds of storytelling and critique that speak directly to present debates on borders, citizenship and race. Postcolonial melancholia, in this sense, is a historically produced emotional condition that shapes how migrants live in, question and subtly remake the worlds created by empire. This movement from hurt into creative response is most visible around the body and everyday aesthetic choices, where disidentification appears in intimate ways. Ifemelu’s decision to cut off her chemically straightened hair is a key moment: when her hairline starts to recede, her friend Wambui tells her, “Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you” (Adichie 229). The image of the hair “prison” reveals how beauty rules and workplace expectations in America control Black women’s bodies, demanding constant effort and pain in exchange for limited acceptance. Ifemelu’s “big chop” does not simply reject Western ideals or fully embrace a romantic idea of Africanness; instead, it shows how a migrant Black woman has to constantly restyle herself within a system that already sees her hair as excessive, unprofessional or “too political.” Ifemelu’s blogs disidentify with that narrative: she works within the language of U.S. liberal feminism “makeover shows,” “professional,” “choice” while turning it against itself, making hair into a race metaphor that exposes structural racism rather than one woman’s preference.

By The Sea offers a quieter but related form of bodily reading in the breakfast scene where Celia serves ham and Ibrahim mocks Omar as “Muslim man... clean clean, clean, wash, wash wash Black man” while Georgy laughs (Gurnah 52). Omar’s body is marked at once as “black man” and “Muslim,” turned into a joke about obsessive cleanliness. The moment shows how refugees are watched and categorized in a private boarding house just as they are in state offices. Ifemelu uses humor in public blog posts and Omar uses irony in private thought. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes that “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language,” and stresses that, for the colonized, mastering the colonizer’s language seems to promise full humanity (Fanon 48). This insight helps explain both Ifemelu’s

uneasy relation to American English and Omar's strategic use and refusal of English. At one point, Ifemelu trains herself to speak with an American accent in order to be taken seriously, but later she deliberately drops it and decides she will not twist her speech just to please others. Even when Adichie does not mention Fanon directly, the logic is Fanonian: to "speak well" is to "exist absolutely for the other," yet that existence is fragile and conditional. Omar's trick about language shows another side of this problem. For weeks he pretends not to speak any English, so aid workers must look for an interpreter, until he finally reveals that he understands and speaks the language perfectly. Omar describes his "petty ruse" with humor, but the scene exposes the arrogance of a system that believes it can fully know refugees without hearing them. His temporary performance of not knowing English imitates the stereotype of the helpless migrant, only to overturn it when he finally speaks. In Muñoz's terms, this is a classic disidentificatory strategy: Omar works "on and against" the institutional script, cooperating just enough to reveal its assumptions. Disidentifications works here not by refusing mimicry outright but by inhabiting it in a way that shows its absurdity. Hair, language and mimicry come together most clearly in Ifemelu's navigation of work and romantic life. After cutting her hair, she at first sees herself as "so ugly [she's] scared of [herself]" (Adichie 230), echoing Fanon's image of the colonized subject who has internalized the racist gaze and feels estranged from their own body. As she experiments with natural styles and writes about the process online, that fear slowly turns into pride and a sense of connection with other Black women who are "transitioning" (Adichie 321–322).

Migrant melancholia in *Americanah* and *By The Sea* does not appear only at borders, detention centers and embassies; it also gathers in small domestic interiors that act as delicate homeplaces, where characters try out new identities and grieve old ones. The broader significance of these imagined homeplaces becomes clearer when set beside current displacement figures. UNHCR's *Global Trends* report says that by the end of 2023 about 117.3 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, violence or human rights abuses, and that the number had risen to over 122 million by mid,2025 (UNHCR, *Global Trends* 2023 8; *Global Trends* 2024 5). Most of these people remain in nearby or regional countries rather than arriving in rich states. Against this background, Omar in an English seaside town and Ifemelu in the U.S. and then Lagos appears as concentrated figures of a global condition in which millions are trying to shape and reshape homeplaces in unstable, often hostile settings. Gilroy's idea of postcolonial melancholia thus looks less like a purely British or European syndrome and more like a worldwide mood, where the "unfinished business of empire" meets new forms of border enforcement and climate disaster. The novels' attention to tiny domestic details the warm metal of Uju's doorknob, the smell of aromatic gum in Omar's Zanzibar house (Gurnah

146; Adichie 118,) becomes a way of giving a human texture to the huge numbers listed in UN reports.

In both books, melancholia is rearranged through shared storytelling and small acts of care, even though the larger forces hostile asylum systems, racial capitalism, displacement intensified by climate change remain in place. Together, these readings deepen the main claim: migrant melancholia in *By The Sea* and *Americanah* is not just a sign of colonial loss but an active process that creates new forms of solidarity and critical awareness. By weaving together scenes from the novels with theory, organizational reports and readers' responses, the analysis shows that these texts do not simply tell stories; they anticipate and illuminate ongoing arguments about borders, belonging and the meaning of home, turning literary reading into an intervention in contemporary migration debates. Both novels are also very concerned with who gets to tell the story of the migrant, and with how melancholia deepens when a whole life is squeezed into one simple narrative. The question of who tells migration stories is not just a literary issue; it is deeply political in the world the novels reflect. International Organization for Migration statistics estimate that there were about 281 million international migrants in 2020, around 3.6 per cent of the world's population, with the global number continuing to rise into the 2020s (IOM 2024). Yet public debate and media coverage often reduce these millions to narrow images: migrants as flows, crises, threats, or burdens. Recent UN linked research, based on many interviews with migrants and smugglers, has also shown that harsh border policies do not stop movement. Instead, they fuel people smuggling, pushing migrants onto more dangerous secret routes and enriching smuggling networks. This kind of evidence, echoed in IOM's own analyses of irregular routes, clashes with political talk of deterrence and reveals a familiar single-story underneath, if migrants are seen only as invaders who must be stopped, then policies that harm them can be presented as necessary. *By The Sea* and *Americanah* respond to this by insisting on detailed, emotional stories of particular migrants Omar's numb feet in the detention center, Aisha weeping because she missed her father's funeral because of papers that challenge the abstract language of "flows" and "crises" (Gurnah 42).

By the end of the analysis, postcolonial migrant subjectivity in these two novels appears as a lasting tension rather than a problem to be solved: a melancholic attachment to damaged homes and blocked futures, combined with a restless drive to disidentify from every script imperial, national, racial, gendered, that demands silence or gratitude as the cost of survival. Describing and analyzing that tension, with close textual work and carefully chosen theory and reports, is the distinctive contribution this thesis makes to discussions of Adichie, Gurnah, migration and postcolonial studies.

5. Conclusion

The present study set out to read Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* side by side through the ideas of Paul Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia and José Esteban Muñoz's disidentifications. The paper has shown that both novels present migration not only as a journey across borders, but also as an emotional state in which the person is caught between mourning and survival. In this place, melancholia is not simply an illness that can be cured, and disidentifications are not simple acts of resistance or obedience. The silence, words and bodily choices of the main characters become difficult negotiations with power that keep showing how the history of empire shapes the present.

In *By The Sea* this argument appears most clearly through Saleh Omar, an old asylum seeker whose life has been shaped by loss, dispossession and a broken sense of time. The novel focuses on his fragmented memories, the court case over the house and furniture shop in Zanzibar and the betrayal by Hussein. Through these events the story shows how colonial rule and later political violence in Zanzibar leave deep psychological wounds. While *Americanah* presents a different but related picture of postcolonial melancholia. Ifemelu's journey from Lagos to the United States and then back to Nigeria is marked by repeated experiences of not feeling at home. The novel shows the emotional cost of becoming black in America, a racial identity that did not shape her early life in Nigeria. Her blog, with its sharp humour and social criticism, becomes the space where she brings into the open things about race that are usually kept quiet in the United States. Using Gilroy's ideas, one can see that Ifemelu refuses the melancholic denial that hides the imperial and racial past. Her choice to stop straightening her hair and to wear it in its natural form also becomes a critique of Eurocentric ideas of beauty.

Disidentifications, understood as a strategy that works both with and against dominant ideology, offers useful language for reading Omar's silence, Ifemelu's blog and Obinze's life as an undocumented migrant in the United Kingdom. These responses are more than simple submission and more than direct rebellion. Bringing together the ideas of Gilroy and Muñoz has allowed this paper to argue that melancholia and disidentifications are not opposites but work together in the reading of postcolonial migrant fiction. Gilroy places the sorrow, shame and confusion of the main characters within the long history of empire, showing how present-day racism and hostility toward migrants continue an old unresolved moral problem. Muñoz, by contrast, highlights the creative ways in which marginalized people survive or at least try to survive. When the two theories read together, one can see more clearly how Omar, Ifemelu and Obinze live in a contradictory space where grief and invention, resignation and resistance exist side by side. Their melancholia marks the emotional remains of empire, while their disidentifications are the repeated small acts by which they refuse to allow empire to have the final word.

It is also necessary to recognize the limits of this research. The focus on two African novels written in English means that many other regions, languages and literary types are not included in the discussion. Postcolonial melancholia and disidentifications might look quite different in francophone writing from North Africa, Caribbean texts or recent refugee stories from the Middle East and South Asia. Future work could place novels like these in dialogue with oral histories, autobiographical writing or ethnographic studies. Despite these limits, the paper confirms the strong and continuing relevance of *By The Sea* and *Americanah* for current debates on migration, race and belonging in the twenty first century. At a time when many states are closing borders, when nationalist feeling is growing and when public talk about refugees and migrants is often hostile, these novels insist on the basic humanity of those who move and those who are forced to move.

In conclusion, reading *By The Sea* and *Americanah* together through the concepts of postcolonial melancholia and disidentifications has shown that postcolonial migrant fiction offers a rich space for thinking about how history, emotion and creativity are tied together. These novels suggest that migrants are not only defined by what they lose. They are also defined by what they create from that loss in the form of stories, relationships, care and small but determined acts of self-making. To pay attention to these processes is to view migration not only as a sign of global inequality but also as a field in which new and fragile yet necessary forms of selfhood and community are always being imagined. The melancholic traces of empire may never completely vanish, but in the writings of Gurnah and Adichie and in the lives of characters like Omar, Ifemelu and Obinze, those traces become something more. They form an archive of suffering that is also, quietly, an archive of endurance and of hope.

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