

# Negotiation of Cultural Identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.



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**Abstract:** *The Nigerian literature illuminates on the experiences of migration which makes a person oscillate between two different places. The novel describes the formative process of Ifemelu and Obinze who fall in love in Nigeria and migrate to the west, and they ultimately reunite in Nigeria after fifteen long years. The article explores the negotiation of cultural identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel the Americanah (2013). The Protagonist and other minor characters questions identity, sense of belonging and they try being as positive models through a negative stereotypical society. The characters undergo a redemptive process through migration as they encounter problem with Race, Language and Hair which culturally connects them to the roots. The article attempts to showcase how culture gets fragmented in the global world where the notion of identity becomes an ever changing factor. As the characters undergo changes because of the convoluted identity they struggle to thrive in their hardships. The article also attempts to focus on how negative attitudes and approaches reminds them of their past and develops a positive attitude enabling them to create an identity for themselves in a diasporic society.*

**Key words:** Identity, culture, Diasporia, Race, language and Hair .

## I. INTRODUCTION

In societies of fragmented cultures compartmentalized within a highly globalized world, the notion of identity is an ever changing one. Very often, one's individual identity is the result of convoluted mix of religious, national and linguistic identities. These often create disjointed and pluralistic identities that tend to overlap with each other and it is the individual's duty to find a harmonious balance between these multiple identities. It is also the root that ties the individual to his/her history and origins and help create a shared identity with other individuals that share similar identities. It is upon this foundation that great civilizations and societies were created.

The contemporary world is not only an arena where new identities are created, but also a battlefield where identities are questioned, challenged and sometimes erased. The legacies of globalization, emigration and colonialism coupled with development of contemporary cultural movements and debates on identities have brought the discourses on identity on to the limelight in social sciences and humanities research.

The emergence of large diasporic communities is another domain of interest to the scientific community due to its attempts to negotiate between identities that are often mutually exclusive. These diasporic communities are often the physical manifestations of colonialism, slave trade, war, migration and globalization. Having been ravaged by Colonialism, slave trade and war in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Africa has been a center stage for studies on identity, cultural appropriation and diasporic societies.

African writers have been exploring the diasporic experience of the nation ever since the existence of a genuine African literature. Through these writings, the authors relive the factors, both internal and external that led to the formation of their identities. The novels of Adichie and Achebe are adept examples of such negotiation of identities. The novel *Americanah* by Adichie makes the reader realize the trans-cultural complexes of the modern era. African writing is no more exclusive to the African continent but a product of writers who exists both inside and outside Africa exploring their new found identities. They are the products of trans-cultural forms who must traverse through their complex identities in trans-national cultures, global cities and other constrains among migrants. Only few novels explore the theme of alienation and identity as Chimamanda's *Americanah* does. The socio-political issues reconfigured in Adichie's novel exhibits a profound engagement with the most demanding trans-cultural complexes of the modern era. The novel has its focus on an effort to bring together opposing cultural forms, to transcend and to generate the other space where self-identity can be viewed and clarified.

## II. ADICHIE AND AMERICANAH

*Americanah* is a story of an aspiring, young Nigerian woman who departs for America to study. Ifemelu searches for better social and educational opportunities. Post migration, she faces a lot of trials and challenges in America. She is neither capable of following her previous lifestyle nor able to adapt herself to the living conditions of America. She tries to acculturate and suffers through defeat as America alienates her as black and Other. Therefore Discrimination affects and creates a sense of belonging towards motherland and the urge to return to Nigeria develops within her. The author throughout the novel tries to bring in the complexities and experiences of Nigeria through the two main characters: Ifemelu and Obinze who represents a diasporic life, the two characters struggle through unpleasant circumstances when in love and they force themselves to migrate to America and England. In States,

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Ifemelu, well-educated and creative entrepreneur, writes a popular blog about her life-style and growing racial and gender consciousness of being black migrant. When she is back in Nigeria, her friends describe her with the name "Americanah", to tease her americanized way of behaviour, as well as attitude toward conditions of living in her home country and sophisticated usage of American English. Obinze and Ifemelu's story is partly set in Africa and in Western countries, the events in the novel shows the experiences of working in different settings within American community. The novel gives importance to African diasporic experience, filled with cultural references that relates to the audiences of the West, Adichie portrays the characters in a realistic sense, enabling the reader to switch between characters with different perspectives and opinions. She tries to fight stereotypes creating a discourse of race divisions and gender and how it affects the lives of the other and especially female migrants in the America. She tries to battle racism and sexism. Furthermore, the author try to develop different forms of identity through the fictional characters in the novels and other texts for the readers. Which serves as a main source in the contemporary society and history as archives of social and cultural values.

### III. NEGOTIATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES

In post 1914 Nigeria, when British ran into the brick walls of culture, they brought in the indirect rule system, which neglected the importance of various cultural practices in African community. The British did not consider these practices as representations of culture. This, according to Hamm, Smaandych (2005) and White (2001), is a form of cultural imperialism where one culture is dominated by another by deliberate policy or technological superiority. The African culture, therefore underwent a forced transformation of values. The British looked into several taboos and took an ethnocentric approach where the British culture was used as a yardstick to assess and evaluate the African societies. This, along with a large scale migration led to a cultural shock and trauma among the Indigenous African community and subsequently, it had a negative impact on the emergence of a new African identity.

As human beings interact with other individuals belonging to divergent cultural groups, it often results in some cultural transference and thereby influencing the cultural identity of the individual. With increased intercultural encounters in the contemporary world, one's identity that is rooted in his/her culture is being constantly challenged, maintained, negotiated and enacted through communicative discourses. The characters in the novel explore multiple identities and its disparities in the postcolonial multicultural setting. Through this constant negotiation of identities, the author brings out the importance of fusion of cultures in the revelation of an individual identity. Identities, according to Stuart Hall, "are a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation". [1] He goes on to categorize identity into two: the former based on the notion of fixed or stable, collective history in which people are affiliated by race and ethnicity [1]. Secondly, it as an unstable, metamorphic, and even contradicting identity because there is no experience, on one's identity. The protagonist of the novel Ifemelu engages in similar attempts to recognize her identity through her racial, ethnic and

national roots of Africa and also linguistic, cultural and social setting of America. Her identity is therefore an amalgamation of identities that are in a constant state of flux. According to Elleke Boehmer, Ifemelu's attempts to construct an identity through the choice of language and outward appearances is an important feature of cultural authenticity, hybridity and resistance. [2]

"Culture represents of language, belief, values, norms, behaviors and even material objects that are passed from one generation to another." [3]. "Culture according to Rothkopf is quite dynamic and often grows out a systematically encouraged reverence for selected customs and habits" [4]. Cultural identity is built and assembled through sharing of traditions, heritage, language, norms and customs. The social convergence on distinct cultures is not been adequately discussed in a wider aspect in the world. It has created cultural pressures in different parts of the world. The emergence of umbrella terms like "indigenous people" "subalterns" and "ethnic minorities" which attempts to bring together multiple divergent communities together have been the result of the rampant globalization and the international desire to voice the voiceless. [5]

Adichie tries to bring out the problems faced by the African community at America and she weaves it with the building of an individual creating an identity for the self. She focuses on three main factors that connects the character culturally to the roots of Africa (i.e.) Race, hair politics and language barriers that she faces. Adichie seeks to show how only straightened hair were considered sophisticated by the Americans than the braids or cornrows. Hair Politics in Americanah connects her to the national cultural identity. Ifemelu is reminded of her mother's glorious as she thinks of the days when she used to braid her hair. But her natural braided hair is considered to be unprofessional and ifemelu spends most of the times at the salons trying to figure out what to do with her hair. She eventually straightens her hair but grows fond of her old braided hair and learns to take care of her hair and feels confident with her hair. The hairs' transformation back to the original shows her roots to her national cultural identity. Even so, Ifemelu unlike her other mates fails to share her passion and longing for America and American culture in the beginning of the novel as she feels inferior. She struggles throughout the novel 'with many identities that she wears' being a Nigerian and an immigrant in united states. The focus of identity gets intensified when on the other hand Obinze's wife, Kosi cannot decide on which education she has to give to her daughter. she confuses herself with either French or British but Obinze reminds her that their generations had the Nigerian curriculum. Therefore the desire to be somewhere, to have the longing for the roots and feeling of belonging is one positive attitude and quest of identity. Nigerian identity is something that is influenced by the western orientation and the large scale migration during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The other factor that connects her to the roots is color of skin. Race is seen as a primary factor in bringing up ones identity culturally. Adichie's uses words that shows 'blackness' is socially constructed and thrust on nationality and ethnicity. For example, "Dear non-Americans black when you make the choice to come out to America, you become black.

Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or Ghanian .America doesn't care.”[6].Ifemelu makes them understand through the blog post that they will be considered black only outside Africa. On the other hand Dike ,her cousin struggles through racism that he tries to kill himself because of the sense of otherness that he feels within. Adichie tries to say that race doesn't really exists for the 'Other' as its never considered as an barrier but for the blacks she feels that it's not a choice. Language is another major element in the novel. Ifemelu and other minor characters communicate in English and changes their accent in an Americanized way of speaking. When everyone gets surprised and overwhelmed with her Americanized way of speaking, she stops using accents and understands that she shouldn't please her language for the 'others'. There is a longing towards her home when she encounters crisis within her. As Bell hooks says “Ifemelu returns to her native with a new sense of understanding and consciousness of structuring the domination in her work life.”[7]

Therefore the negative experiences bring a positive attitude within oneself and it culturally thrives in upbringing of a healthy community with a variety of ideas been put together. It creates a way of living where the individual get connected to his or her native or past. Therefore this feeling of insecurity connects to own socio-cultural system conflicting and resulting in identity crisis, Considering Africa as 'uncivilized', 'Barbaric' and 'the other world'. The colonizers tried to seek the positive aspects of African tradition and roots that would establish the western civilization among them. The immigrants seek to create an identity that decenters realities of the African writers as they engage with multiple forms of experiences, otherness, identity, dislocation, displacement, and alienation. One must acknowledge the significant decentralization that has occurred pertaining transnational cultures in the twenty-first century.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

We belong to world of immigrants with different cultural backgrounds with prideful distinctiveness from one another and their authority from the past. The disintegration of migration interrogates racism, alienation, identity and racism. Americanah shows how Ifemelu longs for her sense of identity which takes her back to Nigeria which she leaves as a young child . She finds a world radically different from that of her early childhood memories and subsequent dreams. The experience that she undergoes makes her feel that she doesn't belong to either world. Ifemelu finds hard to root herself with a positive identity and becomes a negative sense in an diasporic subject, as she fails to adapt herself either in America or Nigeria .She neither carries an identity that is hybrid or plural that critics tend to celebrate in the postcolonial world. Yet, Cultural differences creates a positive form of identity from which to resist racism. The longing of returning back to her roots and the quest for identity shows the positive aspect of identity in the postmodern and postcolonial communities. Associated with, questions of prejudice, alienation, belonging and racism. The novel shows her attachment and closeness to her native that she leaves as a young child. She finds a world radically different from that of her early childhood memories and subsequent dreams. Her experience makes her feel detached to the neither world.

Americanah seeks to show how the immigrants strive to create an identity, reclaiming a space for self by defining identity. The African writers have shifted considerably to specifics associated with trans-cultural issues. There are now carefully articulated observations of trans-cultural imperatives, and finally to lucid commentaries of Africa's changing place in global realignments and mutating socio-political realities. The focus on trans-cultural discourse provides a more accurate rendition of African literary production that has generated new experiences of national particularities which revealed that immigration could have a negative impact on the psychology and behavior of many African immigrants. It generally leads to assimilation, mental complexes and identity loss as seen through the character of aunt Uju and her date. However, Adichie's Americanah is a novel that advocates a Homi Bhabharian Third Space of Enunciation wherein cultural and racial differences could become added values of complementarity, of reinforcement and acceptance instead of stigmatization, rejection and assimilation.

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