

## **The Cultural Negotiation of Immigrants in Adichie's *Americanah***

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the ambivalence retention of immigrant characters to their home and host country in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. The novel depicts the immigrant characters' simultaneous attraction toward and distraction from the native and host country. At times, they manifest fascination to their host country and culture. In such moment, they tend to adopt the cultural practices and lifestyle of their host country. However, they cannot be free from their native culture and country which is deeply rooted in their subconscious. Consequently, these immigrant characters concurrently vacillate between the cultural spaces of their native and host country. In a sense, they adopt new cultural practices of their host country without forsaking the old one. They live in a shared cultural space of their home and host country while negotiating their cultural identity in the diaspora. With such ambivalent retention, they involve in negotiation in the shared space of the diaspora which renders fluidity and inconsistency in their cultural identity. The present article analyzes such ambivalent attitude to the host and native country of immigrant characters by using the conceptualization of third space of Homi Bhabha and cultural identity of Stuart Hall.

**Key Words:** Becoming, being, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, cultural identity, diaspora, third space.

### **Introduction**

The immigrant characters in diasporic narratives find themselves in a struggle to establish an identity; feeling conflicted between two cultures: native and an alien one. They remain in a tension between desires to belong to the new cultural space and an urge to retain their indigenous original culture. Such narratives explore problems of transformation of the native into something other than themselves. Precisely, the ambivalent rendition of characters in diasporic narratives results in an identity crisis.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) portrays simultaneous oscillation between the culture of their origin and host country of African immigrants. The story unfolds in Nigeria, the U.S., and in the U.K. It depicts the journey of Ifemelu and her boyfriend, Obinze, who decide to leave Nigeria after the country falls under military dictatorship in the 1990s. They think that the entry in to the Western country lead to the better future prospects. Ifemelu departs for the United States to pursue her studies. However, she has been victim of discriminatory racist practices in the US. After many hardships, she succeeds in achieving her American dream by having a successful blog on race relations in the U.S. The success does not anchor her in the land of her dream; America. Instead, she returns to her on native land. Obinze, however, doesn't

succeed in following her because immigration to the post 9/11 America becomes difficult. He makes it to the U.K. where he lives a dangerous life as an undocumented immigrant before being deported. The difficult circumstances that Ifemelu experiences in America affect their relationship. Years later, they get back to Nigeria and resume their relationship. They demonstrate ambivalence attitude toward the western and native culture. In such circumstances, a pertinent question often recurs: why do these immigrant characters simultaneously travel through cultures of their origin and that of the host country? And what is the effect of such cultural interaction in the formation of immigrants' identities represented in diasporic narratives? These issues remain less explored in various critical appraisals of the novel *Americanah*. The following section makes a brief and representative survey of the critical responses to the novel.

### Critical Responses

The critical scholarships of Adichie's *Americanah* explore the issues of immigrants' lives, the narrative techniques, social construction of blackness and double marginalization of the black females. Carole Boyce Davies argues that Adichie's explores "the issues of migration and the consequence of living in the diaspora" unlike the previous generation writers who were concerned with "writing back to the colonial empire" and "with tradition in the immediate and post-independence realities" (233-34). Adichie's *Americanah* departs from earlier generation African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o who often explore colonial and postcolonial Africa. Ava Landry also takes up immigrant's issue and explores the acculturation process of the African immigrants by contrasting them with African American who have historical legacy of forced migration and slavery. Landry elucidates:

The process of acculturation for African immigrants consists of a unique, tense, and ever-present struggle between pre-migration ethnic identity and post-migration racial identity, in which African immigrants work both in concert with and in opposition to existing notions of Blackness. (2)

In their acculturation process, the African immigrants need to adopt the white world and the world of the African American both.

Mindi McMann also takes up the issue of "blackness" and its circulation in Adichie's *Americanah* in association with Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. For McMann, the term black "is not a stable signifier of race, but materially and geographically contingent (200). The journey of Ifemelu from her home country Nigeria to her host country American and again back to Nigeria reveals how the perception of blackness varies in different social and cultural contexts.

Similarly, Felix Mutunga Ndaka examines the issue of blackness through feminist perspectives and explores the marginalization of the black females in *Americanah*. Ifemelu, as a black immigrant has to combat with both American racist attitude and patriarchy. Ndaka explains:

"Ifemelu undermines and questions the practice and perpetuation of racist and patriarchal ideologies and structures" (119). The protagonist Ifemelu faces double marginalization: as a female and as a black in the US.

Hope Lee Sneddon also analyzes significance of the salon and the politics of black hair in Adichie's *Americanah*. Sneddon examines the intersection of the black hair, salons and their representations in contemporary literature. Unlike Sneddon, Caroline Lyle involves in critical discussion about the conceptualization of 'Afropolitanism' while analyzing Adichie's

*Americanah*. Lyle expands Taiye Selasi's concept of Afropolitanism which asserts that "African of the world must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural- with subtle tension in between" (101). In Lyle's opinion, the sexual identity category should be included in the postulation of 'Afropolitanism'. Besides identity issues, critics have also analyzed the narrative technique of the novel.

Patrycja Koziel analyzes narrative strategy with special reference to Igbo language and fluid identity of immigrant. She provides examples of several expressions in Igbo language such as phrases, sentences, proverbs and other lexical items from the novel. She argues that Adichie's narrative strategy with Igbo lexicons is the manifestation of multiple subjectivities of an immigrant. Like Koziel, Serena Guarracino also examines Adichie narrative techniques particularly the use of blog as social commentary in the fictional world in "Writing «so raw and true»: Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*". Blog writing is a space, both embedded in but also outside creative writing, and as a place where social realities of race can be discussed without the trappings of character and action. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez examines the psychological and emotional growth of Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel in association of the social interaction in the salon and the cyber space; in which the later one has greater advantages of developing her subjectivity. Cruz-Gutierrez argues that "online communities provide a wider range of possibilities in terms of the practical and cultural knowledge that can be shared" (10). Cruz- Gutierrez asserts that the social interactions in the online space help develop Ifemelu's critical consciousness about the racist practices in the US which in turn contribute in the development of her subjectivity.

In Brief, Davies shows how Adichie's *Americanah* departs from earlier African writing in its depiction of immigrant's life. Unlike Davies, Koziel and Guarracino examine the narrative techniques of Adichie. Koziel analyzes use of native Igbo lexicons in the novel particularly in Ifemelu's blog post which symbolizes her attachment with her origin. Guarracino also explores the narrative technique of using blogging in the fictional world of novel. Ifemelu makes social commentary particularly about race and beauty in her blog posts and reflects her growing subjectivity. Besides narrative techniques, critics also examine the novel thematically. Critics like, Lyle, Landry and McMann explore the different issues related to blackness and their adverse effects on the lives of the African immigrant in the novel. They examine the gender perspective in formation of African identity, acculturation process of black immigrant and social construction of the blackness. Moreover, Cruz-Gutierrez, Ndaka and Sneddon examine the role of salon and cyber space as a social platform in developing the subjectivity of the black people and the politics of black hair in America. In brief, the critics have analyzed the narrative techniques, experience of the black immigrants, the role of salon and virtual community of the black women and social construction of the blackness and its repercussion on the lives of the black people in *Americanah*. In this way, the ambivalent retention and formation of cultural identity of immigrants remain less explored area. The critical postulation of Stuart Hall's cultural Identity and Homi Bhabha's third space substantiate bicultural affiliation of immigrants.

### **Cultural Identity of Immigrants**

Stuart Hall conceptualizes postulates the two specific trends in cultural identity. The first is essentialist identity. Hall draws an analogy between cultural identity and the shared culture:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in term of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' , hiding inside the many other more 'selves' , which people with a shared history and ancestry holds in common. Within the term of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us 'one people' with stable unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning, beneath the sifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual histories.... Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world. (223)

In that line of argument, there is an authentic cultural identity, a true self, which people with shared history and ancestry maintain ever after. The "oneness" is understood as a stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning that reflect the general shared cultural codes and common shared historical experience. Along with the point of similarity, cultural identity embodies marked differences, which constitute what we really are or rather what we have become.

As a second dimension of cultural identity, Hall's perception of culture remains between such an identity as ongoing process of being and that of becoming, of the past and the future as well as present. He further explicates:

It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed on some essentialized past, they subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (225)

Identities are not externally fixed by some essentialized past, but by a continuous play of history, culture and power. The power relation between and among cultures affect the way in which these identities are subject and positioned in the dominant regimes of representation.

By analyzing the formation of human identity in postcolonial context, Homi Bhabha argues that culture does not exist in isolation. It interacts and negotiates with other cultures. Such a process of amalgam renders cultural transformation that shapes an individual's identity. An intrinsic course in lives of immigrants, cultural transformation operates in blending original indigenous native background and new social setting. The connections between immigrants and their home countries, as well as the political status of both home and host countries, affect the ways they adjust to a new location. The engagement in transcultural conversation between the host dominant cultural groups and immigrant groups slowly opens up avenues for transformation. As such, cultural transformation characterizes the in-between as a third element, and fusion of two cultural entities that create a third identity after the original two have been altered.

In this context, cultural transformation becomes related to Bhabha's notion of third space. To address the notion of identity, Bhabha claims that third space "is characterized by discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, and rehistoricized a new" (2). We negotiate between different identities in this "Third Space" where cultures blend and people live in the shared values they embody over years. Negotiation becomes a process

where people of different cultures accept in a society without one culture dominating the other. This co-existence of different cultures ultimately produces a hybrid culture which Bhabha posits as “the inter—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (2). For Bhabha “the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the Third Space” (1), which enables other positions to emerge. A dual culture, hybridity embodies a syncretic view of the world for the contest between the notion of fixity and essentiality of identity. More than mere mixing of cultural materials, the intercultural hybrid space of in-betweenness and liminality maneuvers the negotiation between different cultures. The immigrants in Adichie’s *Americanah* negotiate their cultural identity in the hybrid third space of the diaspora.

### Negotiation of Immigrants

The cross-cultural situation of the diaspora leads the immigrant characters to live in the cultural in – betweenness in which they involve in the process of adoption and resistance of the values and cultural practices of the host country. This process becomes virulent in the hair styling of Ifemelu. In the US, when she is desperately in need of a job, she goes to the career service office of the university and gets an advice of straightening her hair for the upcoming job interview. She had once ridiculed her aunt for straightening her hair. Now, she realizes that straight hair, which is like American, is identified with competence and knowledge and therefore decides to straighten her hair herself: “Aunty Uju had said something similar in the past, and she had laughed then. Now, she knew enough not to laugh” ( Adichie 202-203). After straightening her hair she feels alienated from herself and leaves the salon sad and with a feeling of loss:

The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (203)

When her white boyfriend Curt asks her why she has to straighten her “full and cool” (204) hair, Ifemelu answers:

“My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky.” (204)

Here it becomes clear that Ifemelu reflects why she had to straighten her hair for the job interview. She doesn’t adopt the White beauty norm uncritically but is aware that white straight hair is associated with being professional and competent. She, thus, vacillates between her urge of retaining her typical kinky black hair and the social expectation of straightening her hair in the diaspora.

Besides hair style, the confusion and dilemma are also evident in Ifemelu's blog writing. She starts to write the blog *Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America* as she yearns to be listened to and to exchange her experiences with race and gender with others. She keeps her Nigerian accent marks as a form of resistance to the dominant White culture. Moreover, there is discrepancy between how Ifemelu can express



herself in “reality” and on the blog. When she has become a leading blogger about race, she is invited to talk about race in a company. After her talk on “How to talk about race with colleagues of other races” that she gives to an exclusively white audience, she receives an e-mail saying: “YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY” (305). For Ifemelu, this e-mail equals a “revelation” (205). She understands subsequently that she was not invited to “inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about them. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence” (305). She decides to speak in future talks and workshops about what people wanted to hear and reveal her real thoughts on the blog. At the same time, she realizes that she is not writing for herself anymore but for others. Then, she closes the blog and feels the urge to return to Nigeria: “Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (6). In a sense, she seems to be assertive in registering her protest against racism in her blog and to be submissive in public talk.

Such ambivalent attitude also manifest in her use of language. This becomes particularly apparent when Ifemelu trades Igbo proverbs with Obinze. But there is also a mixture of English and Igbo, which evokes the impression of a simultaneous retention and rejection of one's native language and culture. Words and whole passages in Igbo, the native language spoken in Lagos, are consistently woven into the text. In their interaction, characters often casually add a *sha*, an *o* or a *nah* to the end of a sentence, or start a sentence with *Ahn-nah*. Sometimes it is also more than just one word, for example when Obinze's wife Kosi calls him, she usually says “Darling, *kedu ebe I no?*” which means ‘where are you?’ (21); and when Auntie Uju announces her pregnancy to Ifemelu's parents, she uses Igbo too: “*Adi m ime*” (83). Obinze and Ifemelu seem to be exceptional in use of native language. One day, they argue about who of them speaks better Igbo and compete in reciting proverbs like “*Acho afu adi ako n'akpa dibia*. ... Ifemelu responds: “Many guys won't even speak Igbo, not to mention proverbs” (61-62). These immigrant characters simultaneously use their mother tongue and adopted English language.

Accent is another factor that shows the in-betweenness state in the novel. When Ifemelu first arrives in the United States and Ginika, her old Nigerian friend picks her up from the airport, Ginika tries to speak in Nigerian English. She speaks in “a dated, overcooked version, eager to prove how unchanged she was” (123), although, later with her friends, she has a perfectly American accent. In her first months in the US, Ifemelu feels the reactions to her African accent very strongly. Once, a girl at the information point at university speaks to Ifemelu as if she must have some sort of illness that made her speak so slowly. But when Ifemelu notices that the girl just speaks to her like that because she has a foreign accent, Ifemelu shrank like a dried leaf. She began to practise an American accent. After three years, her American accent is perfect. So perfect that people on the phone think she was an educated White American woman. But when one day a telemarketer tells her she sounded American, “did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words ‘You sound American’ into a garland that she hung around her own neck” (175). This is a traumatic moment for Ifemelu. She seems to suddenly notice how the bond to Nigeria has become weaker and that she was becoming what she never wanted to be. This is the moment when she decides to give up on her American accent that always felt forced and made her sound never truly herself.

The immigrant characters harbor a strong urge to retain their native culture, language and identity although they are striving to explore better future prospects in the west by adopting western values and norms. When Ifemelu realizes that she is alienated by the adaptation to the linguistic norm, she decides to stop faking an American accent. She feels “a rush of pleasure” ( 175) when she starts speaking Nigerian English again. She notices that “[t]his was truly her” (175) and remembers the moment as “the day that she returned her voice to herself” (180). She also stops relaxing her hair with chemicals and starts hair braiding. She “looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (167). She loves her black kinky hair in its natural style.

Even being successful as a blog writer, Ifemelu gets disillusioned with her life in the US. She longs to get back to her home country Nigeria:

It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living that over the months melded into a piercing home sickness. She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Face book, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home ... She looked at the photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. (6)

Ifemelu leaves for the US with "the hope to prosper" (77), but soon she realizes that being black in America is not being usual. She faces the racial discrimination which renders a question in the sense of belonging in the US. Consequently she returns to her own origin: Nigeria.

In recapitulation, the subjectivity of Ifemelu, the leading character of the novel evolves in her constant negotiation between the culture, language and lifestyle of her native country and host country. In this process, she often manifests an ambivalent attitude to the both. Her ambivalent retention is apparent in her hair styling. At times, she straightens her hair like that of white girl. However, she suffers sense of loss and guilt for not keeping her original kinky dark hair. In the same way, she manifests her dual attitude in her blog writing and public speech. In the blog, she strongly denounces the racist practices of American society whereas in her public speech, she tactfully handles the expectation of her audience instead of being assertive. Moreover, she shows her simultaneous attraction and distraction in the use of both English and her native language. At times, she asserts native expression and proverbs in both her blog writing and personal communication. However, she switches to English language and American accent while conversing even with her compatriots. Precisely, she involves in negotiation showing simultaneously attraction toward and distraction from her native and host country and culture.

The immigrant characters harbor a strong urge to retain their native culture, language and identity although they are striving to explore better future prospects in the west by adopting western values and norms.

## **Conclusion**

In diasporic narratives, immigrant characters oscillate between two cultures because they are not totally free from their shared and common ancestry and history: 'being' in Hall's concept. At the same time, they are negotiating with their present and reforming themselves, which Hall

terms 'becoming'. In fact, both the 'being' and 'becoming' conjointly recreate an immigrant's personal identity in the new world far away from their native land. Moreover, their cultural interactions produce ambivalence in them, simultaneously attracted and distracted both to their present and past. Such interactions lead immigrant characters in the third space; doubling and assembling space of being and becoming in at least two places at once constantly negotiating and transforming in a gradual process of identity formation, which inherently remains fluid and ever changing.

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