

Migration and Identity Crisis in Adichie's Americanah

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Abstract: The migrant experience and search for identity are two common motifs running across most post-colonial literature of the world. The global world has witnessed an unprecedented migration of the people from their native lands in search of a better life, in the process leaving them looking for identity and selfhood. The present paper scrutinizes the psyche of an African immigrant in America. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her *AMERICANAH*, traces the life of a young girl Ifemelu, who keeps grappling with her identity of a black African in America, despite her success in all other senses. This paper looks to reveal the deep-rooted culture oppression and domination by the colonizer that leaves the colonized scarred for life. Thereafter, no amount of validation can take away the sense of loss and alienation. Adichie as an author has concerned herself with the effects of colonization on the African self which makes such an indelible imprint on the mind of Ifemelu that no achievement can make her happy and content enough. She is educated, academically successful, has a comfortable life, does not starve like so many of her people back home, has a respectful relationship with her boyfriend unlike most girls and women she had known in her own land and most importantly, a well-paying job, yet she is unable to shed the stigma of a black migrant in America and feels the pinch of being an outsider over and over again. So much so, that she leaves all of it to go back to Africa to lead a life devoid of all luxuries that this foreign land gives her, looking for a sense of identity and belonging. Back in her own country, she is willing to live a life full of everyday hardships and the uncertainty of reuniting with her former sweetheart rather than continuing with a practically comfortable double identity yet constantly feeling like a privileged lesser being in America. The paper shall trace the impact of migration on the African individual and the dream that encouraged the Africans to immigrate to the USA looking for a better life far from corruption,

insecurity and poverty, yet being unable to erase the memory of the homeland that makes them go back looking for the long-lost roots.

Key words: Migration, African Identity, Selfhood, Cultural Oppression, Domination, Alienation, Looking for Lost Roots.

PAPER:

Migration has become an alarmingly overwhelming issue all over the world in the recent past. With the growing globalization, migration has taken rapid advances even in distant lands, until now, less farayed. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie deals with the theme of migration in most of her literary works. Her novels focus specifically on the impact of migration from the African point of view, primarily through the eyes of her women characters, the protagonists of her novels dealing with migration issues that go beyond the usual framework of migration theories. Through a critical and stylistic analysis, this paper aims to show Adichie's handling of migration in her works, especially in her novel *Americanah* (2013). Other works by her that deal with the theme of migration are *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *The Thing Around your Neck* (2009). This study is based on theories of international migration and socio-criticism, namely post-colonial theories of migration and return migration, that help the reader understand the causes, reasons and complexities of the phenomenon of migration and its impact on the writer's hybrid identity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie weaves the tales of migrant African from her personal yarn of experiences, lived through her own life as well as the countless others from her native land who travelled far and wide in search of a better life. She has herself confessed the

mighty influence her seniors, especially the works of Chinua Achebe, have had on her thought process. Their works inspired her work in turn. Many African writers of the first generation, like, Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, etc. experienced forced migration for survival. While in exile, they continued producing literary works. Across their works, in or outside the boundaries of their own countries, they tackled social issues like colonization, slavery, discrimination, gender disparity, identity crisis, alienation and migration. Migration, not just to another country, but also to distant lands away from the native village, in search of better job opportunities or simply to escape from the continuous struggles of rural life of civil strife. The civil wars that most of Africa was thrown into, post the colonizer's exodus had left few opportunities for one in disagreement with the people running the governments to live a life of dignity. The constant political and military coups, strikes and killings spurred many natives to migrate to Europe and Americas. Along with migration, the other constant theme that runs across most works is that of return migration, or coming back to one's native land in search of one's home, one's identity, looking for that sense of belongingness that eludes in the foreign soil. Chinua Achebe, for example, in his essay, Home and Exile (2001), recalls the "story of internal migration in Igboland." His father, an Anglican Missionary, migrated from Ogidi, his home place, for years, but eventually had to return. He remembers that "of all [their] family, only [his] father had ever lived in Ogidi, to which he now brought [them], and he had not lived there since he first began teaching for the Anglican Mission in 1904; it is now 1935."¹ It is a case of return migration, when he retired after thirty-one years abroad of religious work and came back to his native place.

Following the founding fathers of African literature, contemporary African writers are gradually showing deeper concern for this issue in their works of fiction as well as nonfiction. A look at most literary productions, in the last fifteen years, would be good enough to convince us of the recurrence of migration in African literature. For example, the Sudanese Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) narrates the story of a woman from Sudan living in Scotland. Diawara's *We Won't Budge: An African Exile in the World* (2003) presents how the assimilation process shapes the lives and dreams of immigrants in France and in the USA, setting the experiences of the migrants in both countries into comparison. Edugyan's novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004), tells the story of a young man of astonishing promise, Samuel Tyne, who migrates from Ghana to Canada, determined to improve his life. Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1975) is a poignant story of a resourceful Nigerian woman who overcomes strict tribal domination of women and countless setbacks to achieve an independent life for herself and her children in London. Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) on the other hand, deals with the elopement and subsequent migration of the young couple Aku-nna and Chike from their hometown Ibuza to the new industrial town of Ughelli, in search of a land that would let them live a peaceful life away from the evils of class and caste discrimination. Earlier in the novel we have examples of numerous people like the protagonist's parents who left their villages to settle down in cities that offered them a chance at better standard of living in terms of job and education, Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) tells the story of Elvis, a teenager who endeavors to get out of poverty and violence in Lagos. In *Americanah* (2013), and also in her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize Winner *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and the collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), Adichie shows

a deeper concern for the issue of migration, especially that of women. Because these works are telling depictions of what goes on in contemporary society, they list out clearly, the large-scale migration dramatized in contemporary African literature.

The paper focuses on Adichie's literary productions because the theme is recurrent in many of her literary works. Another reason is that she has a personal experience of migration, because her life, from the age of nineteen to the present, is shared between America and Nigeria. What, according to this migrant writer, are the causes and consequences of migration and what impact does it have on migrants and specifically on the migrant writer is beautifully presented in *Americanah* through the character of Ifemelu. The objective of this paper is to use socio-criticism and migration theory to critically and stylistically examine Adichie's multifaceted presentations of the causes and consequences of migration, and highlight its impact on her characters in the novel, who live a life of duality, striving to create an identity for themselves in the foreign land yet yearning to go back to their roots. Adichie won the 2013 U.S. National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction for *Americanah*. This novel tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who emigrates to the United States to attend University. The novel traces Ifemelu's life in both countries, threaded by her love story with high school classmate Obinze. While Obinze migrated to London, Ifemelu moved to the States, and in both their migrant experiences, Adichie is concerned with how migration debases and elevates, how it barter and fulfills and most importantly, how it reinvents a person into a new being.

While many of the migratory experiences in the novel work within the migration theory, Adichie simultaneously transcends the borders of international migration theories by introducing a new factor that influences migration and presents a new perspective on

return migration. Migration theorists such as Dustmann and Weiss say that throughout human history, economic motives for migration or lack of economic opportunity and motives related to natural disaster or persecution, that is, migrating to save one's life are the two main reasons why individuals migrate. In fact, people have been migrating because of poverty, natural disaster or social unrest since ages. Upon examining post-colonial African literature that deals with migration, one comes to the realization that the generally known migration story for African migrants is that of fleeing from poverty or war. Adichie's works abound with examples that defend this migration theory. Some of her works show that the lack of economic opportunity, natural disaster or persecutions are the main factors causing individuals to migrate. For instance, some of the stories in her collection of short stories, *The Thing around Your Neck*, especially "Imitation" and "The Arrangers of Marriage," show girls migrating to America with their husbands, expecting to rise from grass to grace, i.e., from poverty to riches. Nkem, for example,

...was pregnant when she first came to America with Obiora. (...) [they] live in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia, she told her friends in Lagos on the phone. She sent them pictures of herself and Obiora near the Liberty Bell, proudly scrawled very important in American history behind the pictures, and enclosed glossy pamphlets featuring a balding Benjamin Franklin.²

Through this meticulous choice of language, all registering happiness (lovely, proudly, glossy) with powerful American symbols (Liberty Bell, Franklin), the authoress gives the readers a glimpse into Nkem's new life and makes them see how very happy she was with her hopes finally being fulfilled. Coming from such a poor country where, "in her life, her childhood, you snatched the food up, whatever it was, and ate it,"³ even when it

falls on the ground, she definitely did not want her children to relive her early life. Once migrated in America, she wanted her children to be like American ones, that is, “the kind of children who sniffed at food that had fallen on the dirt, saying it was ‘spoiled.’”⁴ Her mindset and expectations reveal that poverty drove her to migrate. Likewise, the old woman, Aunt Ada, in “The Arrangers of Marriage,” compares the fact of finding “an ezigbo di! A doctor in America”⁵ for her adopted daughter, to winning a lottery. This powerful comparison, especially the choice of the word “lottery”, reveals the state of poverty of the place in which the speaker lives and the people’s expectations to migrate to America to improve their standards of living. The word “lottery” denotes chance. Intelligence or wealth does not guarantee a visa, but mere chance as the university lecturer, Ifeoma, explains from her experience in the novel *Purple Hibiscus*, talking about visa officers:

“I don’t know. If they are in a good mood, they will give you a visa, if not, they will refuse you. It is [like] what happens when you are worthless in somebody’s eyes. We are like footballs that they can kick in any direction they want to.”⁶

Such ill-treatment, powerfully expressed with a strong simile that reduces human beings to playful objects, shows the lack of consideration that is done on purpose to discourage many from migrating. Yet, it does not dissuade those who see migration as a way-out of their poverty.

Most of the narratives in Adichie’s collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, can be called “visa stories” where chance is capital, as a queue outside embassy becomes part of the heroines’ lives. Adichie focuses on poverty leading women to the road of migration in most of these stories. Another stark feature of these stories is the

large number of unnamed characters in these stories indicating the kind of identity-less lives that the migrants are forced to live. Though out of their penniless state, their identity as a migrant remains their defining feature.

Apart from poverty, Adichie deals with another major reason for emigration to America in her tales, which is education and a better life, away from the political brunt as witnessed in *Purple Hibiscus*. Through Aunt Ifeoma's decision to move to America with her children, Adichie's purpose is to represent the many Nigerians who think that they could better their lives by leaving their country. This brain drain is mainly induced by bad governance which creates social unease. The head of state fails to provide even basic necessities such as payment of salaries and fuel for example. We learn from Aunt Ifeoma's experience that "no lecturer has been paid for the last three months. They tell us the Federal Government has no money."⁷ She also laments about the shortage of fuel: "We have not had fuel for three months in Nsukka. I spent the night in the petrol station last week, waiting for fuel. And at the end, the fuel did not come. Some people left their cars in the station because they did not have enough fuel to drive back home."⁸ Through the repetition of "fuel" the author makes readers feel how dramatic is this shortage of fuel in a station in an oil-producing country. In such a situation of bad governance and anarchy, the university is in crisis, and the author invites the readers to see it as nothing but "a microcosm of the country."⁹ The difficult lives that the people were forced under the military regime leads people to migrate, to find refuge elsewhere. Ifeoma and her family are not that poor. Yet, even endowed with material comfort, Ifeoma who suffers harassment at work, has to emigrate with her family to the USA.

In her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie introduces yet another cause of migration: war or social conflict. Interestingly, the novel is dedicated to the memories of her

grandparents who “did not survive the war,” the Biafran War (1967-1970). “War is coming,” she said. “Port Harcourt is going crazy.”¹⁰ This fiction tells the story of a group of people, Olanna, Kainene, Ugwu, Odenigbo, and Richard, during the Biafran war in Nigeria and shows forced migration as the only option for survival. The lives of the main characters drastically changed and were torn apart by the brutality of the civil war. As a result of the conflict, Olanna, Odenigbo, their daughter Baby and Ugwu are forced to migrate, to flee from Nsukka, the university town, to Umuahia where Kainene

(Olanna’s sister) runs a refugee camp.

So far, examining Adichie’s works following the principles of migration theory, it can be said that they serve as illustrative examples of this theory as they abound with multiple cases of poverty and conflict-induced migration on which is based this theory. Yet, in *Americanah*, she presents another cause of migration that is new to international migration theory. In fact, one of the peculiarities of Adichie is that in addition to these two main causes of migration, through the characterization of Ifemelu, she makes it possible for readers to take notice of another reason: choicelessness or the unavailability of choice. In fact, the protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze migrate to the USA and the UK because they are fleeing from what they call the “oppressive lethargy of choicelessness.” Ifemelu was “guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay.”¹¹ Through the powerful juxtaposition of guilt and gratitude, the author makes the readers take notice of the situation of unease in which Ifemelu’s quest of freedom of movement leads her. Her being guilty refers to the illegal way she managed to obtain the visa; yet she is thankful because it enables her to always move; without it, she has no

choice but to stay. The passport is synonymous with choice and freedom of movement. The battle against choicelessness is presented to the reader through Obinze's mind while attending a dinner in a friend's house in Britain. Alexa and Georgina were some of the guests. When Alexa commends Blunkett's intention to transform Britain into a refuge for survivors of wars, Obinze agrees with her. Yet, she is ill at ease because the motivations behind her own migration story are different:

'Alexa, and the other guests, and perhaps even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty.'¹²

Adichie uses contrasting words and phrases such as "but", "understand/not understand" to introduce the readers to this new phenomenon of choicelessness, which is presented as a new, modern means of oppression. Both Ifemelu and Obinze belong to the Nigerian middle class. They do not suffer from abject poverty, nor are they directly at risk of life. Their migration is not induced by the conventional reasons, but by the need to experience choice and something new somewhere else. In this context, one cannot help but agree with the critic Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith (2014), who, when writing on the stylistics of return migration in *Americanah*, comes to the conclusion that "the need to flee choicelessness defines *Americanah* as a new kind of migration story and sets the text in motion against recognized migration theories."¹³ Thus, Adichie adds a new literary

dimension to migration theory in suggesting the want of choice as a valid cause leading even some well-to-do people to migrate illegally. However, to a certain extent, the lack of choice can be seen as another kind of poverty – that, in the psychological sense. Though, this does not underestimate Adichie's originality. She deserves all credit for revealing this specific type of poverty. Poverty is not only economic or financial. It could be psychological for want of mental freedom, could be structural, through the lack of infrastructure or opportunities, or spiritual, through the presence of only one religion or spirituality; and all are linked. In a country where the majority is poor, the choices of the few rich in terms of standard of living and lifestyle are very limited. As they cannot create the new structures and opportunities in their environments, they have to leave and find these choices elsewhere. It is this particular type of poverty, the lack of choice, that characterizes Adichie's originality. It is a reason not often mentioned in migration theories. One can say that with this new dimension in Ifemelu's migration story, Adichie introduces a literary intervention to international migration theory in justifying the illegal emigration of some wealthy people. So, Adichie resorts to many literary aesthetics, mainly comparison and contrast, to present many reasons for migration in her literary works. From one novel to another, she explores various factors which lead people to the road of migration, namely poverty, war, education, personal agenda and choicelessness. Despite its origin or source, no migration is devoid of consequences on the identity of the individuals as these try to adapt to new cultures and situations. Adichie's *Americanah*, along with the motive behind migration, also deals with the consequences of migration. While on the one hand she explores the discontentment brewing in Ifemelu's heart where she feels uprooted in spite of her academic and professional success; wherein she gets into a relationship with a black American but

never really feels at home with him, constantly missing her high school sweetheart Obinze, she also depicts the challenges befalling Obinze in his migrant life in London from where he is deported back to Nigeria. Though he is also in love with Ifemelu, when convinced of her engagement to another man, he dives into making a mark for himself in the society. He establishes a successful business, marries a beautiful woman (trophy wife) well respected in society, has children with her – everything to establish his success as a return migrant. Later, when Ifemelu is unable to ignore her heart's calling any more, and decides to go back to Nigeria, Adichie uses her experience to depict such cases of return migration. Analyzing them from the point of view of the theory of return migration, it can be said that her fiction falls within the ambit of this system. In fact, in this theory of migration, especially in its neoclassical approach to international migration, return migration, the phenomenon of return back home of the migrants is viewed as the outcome of a failed migration experience which did not yield the expected benefits. The migrants' return to their countries of origin occurs, according to these theorists, as a consequence of their failed experiences abroad, or because their great expectations were not met. For example, back home after her stay in America for thirteen years, Ifemelu tells how difficult migration has been for her, her disillusionment when her expectations were shattered once in America. She criticizes the racist America from a non-American African perspective in her "anonymous blog called Race Teeth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black."

With such examples of return migrants, Adichie subscribes to this theory. However, Adichie brings something new to this theory of return migration as she did regarding the reasons for migration. In fact, it can be observed that none of the reasons for migrants'

return (back to their home countries) that are identified in “return migration” theories fully match Ifemelu’s return decision. While for the major part, her return can be interpreted as her quest for love, there is no denying that along with her curiosity to see if she could reinvent her relationship with Obinze, it was also the sometimes subtle, and at times blatant discrimination and loss of identity she felt in America that made her long to get back to her roots. In fact, Ifemelu’s journey out of his country and voluntary return back transcend the borders of both “migration” and “return migration” theories because her case, unlike Obinze’s, is motivated by the need to flee from ‘choicelessness’ and while his return is forced, hers is not based on any convincing reason. In this sense, Adichie is bringing in a new dimension to “return migration theory” by focusing on freedom, which makes choice possible. Ifemelu migrated illegally into America but it is freely and legally that she undertakes the return journey.

By juxtaposing and contrasting “choicelessness” and “freedom”, that is, the motives for migration and those of return, Adichie reinforces the idea that it is only the need for freedom that really leads some rich people on the road of illegal migration when they have been denied a visa. She also shows that they become hybrid like the other migrants as a result of migration.

Culturally, migrants are bound to imitate the culture and way of life of the country they migrate to. Once in America, they have to adjust to a new culture. In Americanah, Adichie resorts to the characterization of Alma to express the complexity of identity that is ever changing according to place and circumstances: “If Ifemelu had met Alma in Lagos, she would have thought of her as white, but she would learn that Alma was Hispanic, an American category that was, confusingly, both an ethnicity and a race.” Identity is presented here as something given by the community one finds oneself

in:Lagos people would see Alma as white while Americans would take her for aHispanic. She cannot impose an identity of her own making or choice to anycommunity. Identity is thus presented as being dependent on place andcircumstances.Adichie also uses the road symbolism to express migration or to equate the dynamism of movement with the acquisition of new identities. In Americanah, the novelist describes the town of Warrington as “a town contented with itself;winding roads cut through thick woods—even the main road, which the residents did not want widened for fear it would bring in foreigners from the city, was winding and narrow.”¹⁴ The narrow road and the desire to keep it unchanged symbolize the inhabitants’ unwillingness to welcome other people coming from elsewhere. Besides, by presenting Ifemelu as someone who is always on the road and who loves “to drive herself because the roads were empty”¹⁵ Adichie makes the readers see her as a migrant whose identity constantly changes. The move gives rise to multiple identities. At the end of the journey, the traveller is conflicted. A telling example is that of Ifemelu’s cousin whose conflicted identity Adichie reveals through dialogue between Ifemelu and Auntie Uju:

“Have you read the essay your cousin wrote?”

“Yes.”

“How can he say he does not know what he is? Since when is he conflicted? And even that his name is difficult?”

“You should talk to him, Auntie. If that is how he feels, then that is how he feels.”

“I think he wrote that because that is the kind of thing they teach them here. Everybody is conflicted, identity this, identity that”¹⁶

The child has multiple identities as a result of moving from one place to another so that at the end he does not know what he is. He is so conflicted in his mind that he goes into clinical depression and even attempts suicide.

Such identity conflict is also evident when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and she chooses to be identified as an 'Americanah' rather than as an 'American'. Oluwafunlola Idowu Faith says that "in Nigerian parlance, the term 'Americanah' is an identity term that is premised on a person's previous experience in America." It is self-revealing in the speaker's American accent. 'Americanah' denotes an affinity to America without deep roots in it, where 'American' is the identity signifying rootedness in America.

Adichie also uses the difference in language and diction to talk about another aspect of adjustment that the migrants have to make, sometimes stressing on calling biscuits as cookies, and at other times focusing on the distortion of names by the Americans, as in this telephone conversation in Americanah:

Aunty Uju's cell phone rang. "Yes, this is Uju." She pronounced it You-joo instead of oo-joo. "Is that how you pronounce your name now?" Ifemelu asked afterwards. "It's what they call me."

Ifemelu swallowed the words "Well, that isn't your name." Instead, she said in Igbo, "I did not know it would be so hot here."¹⁷

The readers receive a lesson on pronunciation and are also informed that a person's identity changes with the pronunciation of one's name. Aunty Uju is both You-joo for native Americans and oo-joo for Igbo people. She and Ifemelu speak both English and Igbo in translation in order to be understood by audiences who are not bilingual. Therefore, migration is rather opening new areas of exploration for writers, expanding their worldview and enriching their literature beyond orality.

Most of Adichie's works, namely *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, *Americanah*, give witness to migration-induced tribulations in African societies. With the help of international migration and return migration theories and socio-criticism, this paper has investigated Adichie's *Americanah* and has shown Adichie's deep concern for migration as well as its impact on the identity of the migrants. Ifemelu's experience in America serves as an example of the successful migration, yet her feeling unmotivated in that land that offers visible achievements yet is unable to fill her void within, that yearning for a sense of belongingness makes her opt to return. While her love for Obinze is the primary factor behind her decision, it is made quite evident through her blogs that Ifemelu never really felt at home in the United States. Adichie's handling of the issue of migration, especially that of women and the elites, to promising horizons is worthy of attention. The addition of 'choicelessness' as another cause of migration is her major contribution to the world of literary criticism and migrant studies through this novel. Among migration-related consequences, she mentions discrimination, humiliation, ill-treatment, hybridity and disillusionment, and she highlights that "return migration" is sometimes done freely, out of the longing to get back to the roots, even if the trees growing out of those roots not be as fruit-laden as in the migrated lands.

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