

## Adichie's *Americanah*: Remembering Home, Negotiating Identity

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### Abstract

The remembrance of the homeland is fundamental to the negotiation of a transnational migrant's cultural identity in the mélange of multiculturalism/transnationalism fostered by globalization. Available studies on Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* dwell on race, gender and transcultural identity to the exclusion of memory and cultural identity relationship that is highlighted in the text. This essay draws from the Postcolonial theory – a theory that interrogates and reinterprets the cultural intercourse between the colonizing powers and the erstwhile colonies. Culture and power relationship is eloquent in Adichie's text, consequently necessitating and validating the employment of the theory. This essay examines in the text the place of memory of the homeland in the negotiation of cultural identity in the diaspora. *Americanah* reveals some Nigerian diasporic characters in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. All but one of the diasporic characters suffer a mental disconnect from the homeland. Consequently, they easily sacrifice their cultural identity for a transnational identity. In contrast, the main character, Ifemelu, exhibits cultural fidelity through her mental interactions with the homeland and this catalyzes the negotiation of her cultural identity. Obvious through the actions of all the diasporic characters examined is that one's cultural identity fidelity or otherwise is a function of one's mental interface with or disconnection from the homeland.

**Keywords:** memory, diaspora, identity, cultural, transnational

### Introduction

Globalization, an economic and cultural as well as technological unification of the world, has engendered greater movements of people, goods and services from different parts of the globe, particularly from the erstwhile colonized countries to colonial empires. The movements have both economic and cultural implications for the sources and destinations of the migrations. The movements of people on the one hand and goods and services on the other hand have both been contrastively lopsided. For humans, the migration is more from the global south – “Third World” countries – to the global north made up of the United States of America, Canada, Western Europe and recently China. Conversely, for goods and services, the slant is greatly towards the south from the north, validating the position of Immanuel Wallerstein, who, way back in the 1970s, had identified an economic inequality in the economic relations of nations (qtd in Strikwerda 334).

The unevenness in the increased migrations of goods, services and humans in

recent times has continued to catalyze contestations over the concept of “globalization” by scholars of on both sides of the divide, especially in such fields of study as the sciences, Cultural Studies, and Social Sciences. The disputations, which are hinged mainly on the gains and losses of globalization, bifurcates – economic and cultural. The focus in this essay, however, is the cultural import of the concept. Below are the positions of some of the contenders in the debate.

For the position of beneficiary-nations instantiated in the opinion of Yin Wang's (83), an Asian scholar, who looks at globalization from the prism of science and technology, it enhances human relationships across the globe and promotes cultural identity, particularly cultural uniqueness. The cultural distinctiveness as espoused by Wang is as old as the existence of humans, therefore predates the trending globalization and invalidates his position on its promotion of cultural uniqueness. His position is further voided by the cultural imperialism discernible in the wake of the inundating movement of goods to the global south, with its

consequence on the lifestyles and the cultures of the receiving nations.

Cultural imperialism fuels mistrust of the concept “of globalization” in scholars from the global south, especially when viewed against the origin of the concept and its universalizing intent. Jan Nederveen Pieterse is one of such scholars who is cynical of the concept. Tracing its provenance to the west, he argues that globalization is a reconfiguration of westernization. This suspicion is louder in Gareth Griffith who also traces the ancient roots of the concept to the never-dying imperialism of the West. He argues:

Globalization did not simply erupt spontaneously around the world, but has a history embedded in the history of imperialism, in the structure of the world system, and in the origins of a global economy within the ideology of imperial rhetoric ... That global culture is a continuation of a dynamic of influence, control, dissemination and hegemony that operates according to an already initiated structure of power that emerged in the sixteenth century in the great confluence of imperialism, capitalism and modernity explain why the forces of globalization are still, in some senses, centered in the West (in terms of power and institutional organization), despite their global dissemination (99).

Griffith’s conclusion on the foundation and nature of globalization is a re-echoing of Wallerstein’s voice. Wallerstein has also traced the taproot of the concept that originated in the West to the sixteen century:

The years 1945-90 cannot be appropriately be appreciated without understanding that they are merely the latest period in the long history of the modern world system, a historical social system that originated in the sixteenth century. (qtd in Strikwerda 338)

Positions such as those held by the above scholars are representative distrust of scholars from the global South who understand globalization as not only economic and technological imperialism but

also cultural imperialism from the West. Ania Loomba expresses concern over the implication of the Western-inaugurated globalization for the cultural identity of postcolonial societies when she construes the concept “as the producer of a new and ‘liberating’ hybridity or multiculturalism, terms that now circulate to ratify the mishmash of cultures generated by the near unipolar domination of the western, particularly the United States, media machine?” (qtd in Paul Jay 48)

The apprehension over newer cultural hybridity or multiculturalism as expressed by Loomba is quintessential of postcolonial scholars among whose polyphonic voices Loomba’s is one. The exodus, especially in the twenty-first century of people from the periphery to the metropolitan center with cultural pluralism in its wake menaces the cultural distinctiveness, especially that of migrants from the global South to the global North. The peril on cultural peculiarity crystalizes in the cultural hybridity exhibited by the diasporic from the Third World. Tanure Ojaide identifies this mishmash in the writings of African migrants to the West when he says:

Many African writers in the West (European metropolitan centers, Canada, and the United States) are caught in the bind of “multiple homelands,” their new immigrant home in the West and their abandoned African homes. African writers have become part of the worldwide phenomena of migration and globalization with its attendant physical, socio-cultural, psychic and other forms of dislocation which permeate their individual writings. Migration, globalization, and other forms of dislocation...have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content, and form of literary production of Africans abroad (31).

In such diasporic works as Chris Abani’s *Grace Land*, Ojaide identifies in the actions of the characters the conflation of cultural habits alien to African culture, but indigenous to the foreign land. Such unfamiliar cultural practices as identified by Ojaide are obvious manifestations of the “Third Space of enunciation” – in *betweenness* or cultural

hybridity – detected by Homi Bhabha (37).

Amidst of hybridity enabled by transnational migration, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's major character, Ifemelu, in *Americanah*, the text of consideration in this essay, negotiates her distinctive cultural identity as a Nigerian. Drawing from the postcolonial theory that evaluates the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, vis-à-vis the implications of the intercourse for the cultural identity of the erstwhile colonized becomes imperative in the analysis of Adichie's text in this essay.

Since its publication, Adichie's *Americanah* has elicited scholarly critical responses, all woven around the migrant identity. Exploring the text, Patrycja Koziel (96) associates the deployment of several Igbo expressions by the author as a major narrative strategy as a stamp of her distinctive cultural identity in a diasporic milieu.

Olaocha Nwadiuto Nwabara (2017) in his thesis titled, *New Routes to the African Diaspora(s): Locating 'Naija' Identities in Transnational Cultural Productions* examines cultural projections in literary and media productions as captured in Adichie's *Americanah*. He interprets the cultural identity negotiation by Nigerians as a form of resistance to the racially-influenced yoking together of Blacks in America and the UK diaspora.

Chineye Amonyeze's (2017) interpretation of the text is not different from Nwabara's as he also sees Ifemelu's bicultural identity as a radical response to racial discrimination. This position is not at variant with Paola Bica (2020) who sees the African diaspora in Adichie's text as being compelled by the racialized foreign environment to wear false foreign identities to gain acceptance. Hammed Oluwadara Adejare's (2018) analysis of Adichie's text, albeit from the prism of *Afropolitan* concept evolved by Taye Selasi, is no departure from the race theme as he sees the struggles of African migrants in Europe and America as catalyzed by the need to define themselves beyond the umbrella definition of the racialized term Black that is associated with slavery.

On his part, Macmillan Feldner (2019)

sees the major character, Ifemelu as experiencing some developmental stages that start in Nigeria, then continues unto her relocation to the United States, where she moves into her third stage – assimilation. Her last stage is her eventual return to Nigeria, her home country. Hannah Watson (2021) in her analysis of the text, sees America robbing off Ifemelu, particularly the foreign accent she had picked and her hair transformation. Although, she later retrieves her Nigerian identity, at her eventual return to Nigeria, a part of her misses America.

While, cultural identity alongside racism is loudly examined by scholars, the place of memory of or her mental interaction with the homeland that underpins the negotiation of the cultural identity and eventual return to the homeland, particularly of the main character – Ifemelu – has often escaped the critical lenses of scholars. It is against this background that this essay with a focus on the remembrance of – the mental interaction with – the homeland as a means of negotiating cultural identity in the diasporic space establishes its relevance.

It is worthy of note that most of the younger generation of Nigerian writers of international renown are diasporic. Most of them, if not all, are victims of globalization and its economic and cultural consequences. They were dislocated from their traditional homeland as a result of the conomic-political imbroglio. Some of these writers include Helon Habila, Biyi Bamdele, Chimamanda Adichie, and Sefi Atta.

These writers in their diaporic space have become transcultural, but struggle to retain their cultural identity and contact with their home country by having the settings, characters and events in their narratives woven around their homeland, Nigeria. The deliberate acts of these writers smack of an attempt at providing a psychological cushion for themselves in the face of alienation in their new environment, and a feeling of severance from the homeland.

Besides the homeland settings that is resonant in the African diasporic texts, there is still evident in the texts the recall of the homeland – this also provides a psychological bond between these writers and the homeland. The recall is also obvious in Adichie's *Americanah*. The text is suggestive of her efforts at sustaining a grip on her

cultural identity in the face of an expectedly overwhelming alien milieu. This is validated by the loud parallel between Adichie and the main character in her novel, *Ifemelu*, a diasporic character who struggles to adjust to the new environment. In the text, *Ifemelu*'s acculturative struggles are punctuated by recalls of the homeland. The recall is a very significant means of retaining her cultural identity as a Nigerian – an Igbo in particular. The remembrance of the home also influences her paralleling Nigeria – from which she is severed to acquire a university degree – and America. The mental interactions with the values of the homeland influence some of her actions – as well as her assessment of other people's – especially non-African with whom she interacts. Her mental interactions or recall of the homeland peaked with her homeward pull that culminates in her eventual relocation to Nigeria. *Ifemelu*'s actions prompted by her mental interface with the homeland and the attitudes of other Nigerian diasporic characters in the text shall be examined in this essay.

First, the problem of frequent industrial actions embarked upon by lecturers in universities across the post-colonial Nigerian state because of months of unpaid salaries propels *Ifemelu* to relocate from Nigeria to the United States of America for her university education. These frequent industrial actions are catalyzed by economic mismanagement on the part of military/political leaders – a major characteristic of most postcolonial African countries – which triggers transnational migration.

In *Americanah* it is not only *Ifemelu*, but other youthful characters at different times who relocate to the metropolitan centers of America and Europe. The other characters include her Nigerian secondary school and university friends and her older female cousin that include Ginika, Obinze, Emeneke, Nicholas, and Aunt Uju – her female medical doctor cousin. While *Ifemelu*, Ginika and Uju migrate to the United States, the other characters move to the United Kingdom – where they are exposed to the insipid experiences of racism, alienation and cultural identity crisis. These experiences and the responses of the characters in their different environments, which shall be examined in course of this essay, showcase

the diaspora's attempt at negotiating his or her cultural identity in an alien environment. In this engagement, Adichie does admit through her characters the impossibility of the unsullied cultural identity of the diasporic. This admission is consistent with Homi Bhabha's position on cultural contact when he identifies in the colonial subject *in-betweenness* or cultural hybridity that he refers to as "the Third place of enunciation" (37). It is within such a space that Adichie, through the main character, *Ifemelu*, negotiates her cultural identity in the diaspora through recalls of the homeland.

The remembrance of home, which runs through the gamut of the text, is visible from her arrival at the home of her elder cousin, Aunt Uju in America. *Ifemelu* is surprised at two things she notices: Aunt Uju's roughly braided hair in a supposed "land flowing with milk and honey" and the deliberate mispronunciation of her name "*you-joo*" instead of "*oo-joo*" (125). *Ifemelu*'s consternation at her cousin's rough hair and her acceptance of her mispronounced name are consequences of her mental contrast of Aunt Uju's sophisticated Nigerian past and her American present. While her amazement can be waved off as the expected naiveté of one who is yet to come to terms with the realities of life in a foreign land, but her sustained discomfort with her cousin's mispronunciation of her name even after *Ifemelu*'s Nigerian cultural identity should have been eroded by time suggests her resolve to cling on to her identity. Her displeasure with the cousin evinces her as one whose recall of or mental interaction with the homeland is intact. On the contrary, based on her memory of home, she adjudges her cousin, Aunt Uju's action as a cultural compromise. In her recall of or mental interaction with the homeland, *Ifemelu* interprets "*yoo-joo*" as a meaningless string of letters, having no place in Igbo nomenclatures. Unfortunately, Aunt Uju accepts this meaningless string of letters as her name without any objection as she simply tells a shocked *Ifemelu* "It's what they call me." (126)

Uju's acquiescence in the despoiled form of her name is an admission of her inferiorization and the sacrifice of Nigerian, particularly Igbo cultural identity on the altar of transcultural identity. Her acceptance of her inferiority is further

underscored by her attitude towards her Igbo language, a major aspect of her cultural identity. Ifemelu notices with her discontentment that while English is the regular language of communication between Aunt Uju and her son Dike, Igbo is reduced to an occasional language of reprimand – when the former is angry with her son. These acts of Aunt Uju that smack of cultural compromise are consistent with Ranjana Tripathi's interpretation of the mind of migrants, vis-à-vis the discarding of the cultural values and identities. Tripathi explains that cultural boundaries become unreal to the migrants as they “keep positioning something of the cultural ethos of that particular country (*the host country*) on themselves.” (165) The italicized words are mine.

Such privileging of the cultural values of the foreign land over those of the motherland is often associated with migrants who adopt transcultural identities, hence feeling no sense of loss over their cultural identity as is illustrated in Aunt Uju's attitude. Displeasure over cultural devaluation, however, can be felt by one whose memory of the homeland is evergreen as is the case with Ifemelu. Obvious in these two characters, therefore, are the conflicting attitudes of two sets of people from a common cultural background, exposed to the same diasporic challenges, but respond differently.

On the one hand, there are transcultural immigrants with compromised cultural identity – illustrated in the text through such people as Aunt Uju, Emeneke, Ginika, Nicholas and his wife Ijugo. On the other hand, there are those who against all odds negotiate their cultural identities – Ifemelu represents this latter group. The paralleling of the two sets of people in the text is not inadvertent on the part of the writer as overly evident in the narrator's satirical comments about those in the first groups. This group serves as a foil to accentuate Ifemelu's cultural attachment and consequential struggles to affirm her identity.

The inherent duality of the diasporic characters – the cultural compromisers and the culture loyalists – therefore necessitates the examination of the text with a focus on the contrast in the disposition of the characters to the culture of the homeland and that of the alien milieu. Their actions and attitudes shall be viewed within the

prism of the memory of the homeland or the blurred memory.

Unlike Ifemelu, the transcultural migrants in the mold of Uju are not influenced by the memory of the homeland as there is no evidence of their recall of the homeland. No wonder their easy identity capitulation to a supposedly superior culture without a feeling of loss. Aunt Uju and Ifemelu's contention over the latter speaking Igbo to Dike, the son of the former, reveals a disconnect or connection with the homeland. Aunt Uju manifests her cultural estrangement when she expresses fears that her son's competence in his mother's language will jeopardize his Americanness. She, therefore, takes serious exception to Ifemelu's speaking to her son in Igbo, arguing, “Two languages will confuse him.” (131) On the contrary, Ifemelu's rejoinder to her cousin's statement reveals her attachment to her culture as she recalls their shared past at their homeland, Nigeria, “What are you talking about, Aunt Uju? We spoke two languages growing up.” (131) Uju's reply to Ifemelu's statement does not only unveils the roots of her apprehension but also underscores her cultural compromise as she says, “This is America. America is different.” (131) In her thinking, therefore, Igbo language or the memory of its culture is too cumbersome to be hauled into the diasporic space in America.

It is not, therefore, surprising that this belief carves in her a new sense of taste and fashion that evince cultural concession. Her compromised sense of taste is revealed where she goes to pick some items from a grocery store. The narrative voice unveils, “Aunt Uju never bought what she needed; she bought what was on sale and made herself need it.” (130) She seems to have buried her past, even her sense of dressing with the homeland as Ifemelu's recall of Aunt Uju's Nigerian past reveals the latter's new capitulated looks: “the old Aunt Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. She would never have tolerated the ingrown hair that grew like raisins on her chin or worn trousers that gathered bulkily between her legs” (131). Ifemelu aptly concludes about her cousin, “America had subdued her” (131). These forms of sense of self-surrender as exhibited by Aunt Uju, especially in dressing sense and acquiescence in the mispronounced name are

however not spoken of about Ifemelu. This overtly suggests that Adichie has deliberately juxtaposed the two characters to underscore the affirmation of her cultural identity through Ifemelu.

This point is further validated in the text through other Nigerian characters with transnational or hybridized identities. Ginika, the first of Ifemelu's American diasporic classmates with whom she re-establishes physical contact, displays the death or absence of her memory of the homeland. When she moves over to share an apartment with Ginika, Ifemelu discovers that the erstwhile pretty Ginika, who had been a belle back in Nigeria, has become shadowy of her Nigerian past. To the consternation of Ifemelu, however, her friend is unperturbed about her lost African beauty or shriveled cultural identity. She is rather happy about wearing a transcultural identity as she admires Ifemelu slim looks and tells her that she is delectable to American men. Obviously that Ginika's sense of aesthetics is American-influenced and not Igbo culture-induced. This is because, for her, like Aunty Uju, the homeland with its cultural aesthetics is not worthy of recall as she melts into the culture of the host country, becoming a transcultural migrant.

Emenike, a diasporic Nigerian in the UK is not different either. He marries a far older British lawyer, lives in a British home and travels on a British passport, in exchange for his cultural identity. Trading off one's identity for a transcultural identity can only be possible where the migrant disconnects mentally from his or her roots. Consequently, the actions and interactions of such an individual will be shaped by the cultural values of the host country. No wonder that he delightfully enters into a conjugal bond with a much, much older woman – an act that is at variance with his Igbo cultural values and is, therefore, indicative of his mental disconnect from the homeland. Albeit, he does once express nostalgia for the homeland in his discussion with his Nigerian schoolmate and friend, Obinze; the nostalgia is expressed with blandness. This is evident in his laughing off his statement, "It's been so long but I just haven't had to travel back home. Besides, Georgina would not survive a visit to Nigeria" (305). His English wife would

not survive a visit to Nigeria because, in the sarcastic words of the narrative voice, the homeland is a "jungle and himself the interpreter of the jungle." (305)

His interpretation of the homeland as a jungle is not far from Nicholas' and his wife, Ijugo's in the UK as they idolize the British education, ensuring that their children are proficient in British English at the expense of their Nigerian language. This demonstrates their disengagement from or loss of memory of the homeland, which is not surprising because he has become so engrafted into the British culture that he loses memory of even his youthful outrageousness back in the homeland. A man who can forget such a past is capable of losing the memory of his cultural identity. Obinze, his cousin and friend, is not surprised at Nicholas' memory loss. He is however surprised at the friend's "loss of even the smallest memory of it (*his youthful outrageousness*)" (276).

Ifemelu's friends' and her cousin, Aunty Uju's easy capitulation to transcultural identities suggests that the blurred memory of the homeland is causal to their transnational identity and this parallels Ifemelu's sensitivity to her cultural identity.

#### **Ifemelu's cultural identity in the Diaspora**

Ifemelu actions and engagements in the foreign land are distinct, especially at the early period of her arrival in America. Although she later becomes transiently transcultural, her earlier actions and engagements are goaded by the memory of her cultural distinctiveness that enables her to negotiate her humanity as a black person amidst racial discrimination in the foreign land. The recall of her homeland influences her to attempt deconstructing the myth about the near-heaven beauty of America and reconstructing her cultural pride through her paralleling of the foreign land with the homeland. With some taint of cultural pride, she compares her Nigerian university's hostels to the rented hostel in the US that she shares with other female nationals of different countries. Vis-à-vis the sanitary conditions, unlike her Nigerian hostel mates, her new flatmates leave empty cans of drinks here and there in the sitting room. Her cultural identity evokes in her further memory of her Nigerian university hostel, which

although had maggots in the toilets, were, however, free from the invasion of rats that seem to be legitimate co-tenants in her rented hostel abroad.

Besides, Ifemelu's negotiation of her cultural identity seems to be honed by coveting racial prejudice in her new environment as she grows from mere recall and comparison of the homeland to the foreign land and then to the protection of the cultural identity. For instance, when Laura, a white supremacist in a racial slur describes Ifemelu and other African migrants as being among the privileged few among millions wallowing in poverty, she takes exception to the word "privileged," contending "I have never been called privileged in my life" (197). By her reply, she is telling Laura that in her country, Nigeria, she had enjoyed every privilege as others as there was no segregation based on color. No wonder, she says she was not black until she came to the US.

#### **Ifemelu's transiently identity Disconnect and Reawakening**

Although Ifemelu had displayed some sense of cultural pride in her encounter with Laura, a covertly racist white American, she later suffers transient cultural disconnect. This happens because she lets off her guard, allowing America to seep into her as she apes and perfects the American accent to gain acceptance. Nwabara interprets this act as a weapon she employs to protect herself in the racially discriminatory environment (127). From the affected accent intended to protect herself, she degenerates further in her identity compromise, to the point of trying to have her African hair transformed in a salon to whites'.

But during the process of her transition from African to American, she gets her scalp burnt. The hair salon is symbolic of the place of her cultural death and rebirth. Her cultural identity dies for alien looks when her hair is relaxed. The death of her cultural identity is underlined by her feeling towards the burnt hair; to her, the burnt scalp is "like something organic dying which should not have died." Consequently, it 'made her feel a sense of loss' (237). The demise of her African cultural essence is amplified by Ifemelu's seeing a new "mirror image he did not recognize ..." (237) because it contrasts with her African identity. As a result of

the transformation "the verve was gone" (237) in her, so "she left the salon almost mournfully" (237).

It is worthy of note that Ifemelu in her transient memory-disconnect had seen her natural African hair with its kinky looks as symbolic of 'primitivism' in the country of whites; hence she had gone to the transformation to gain acceptance into the 'civilized' culture of the metropolitan center. Adichie, in the novel, however, presents the natural African hair as connotative of the African cultural identity or essence that Ifemelu ignorantly destroys and later mourns. After mourning the loss of her natural hair, she however resurrects culturally anew to redefine herself as outside the culture of the imperial center. She affirms her cultural identity by choosing to have her natural hair braided and becoming inexorably determined to return to her own country, Nigeria to pick up a job offer, despite dissuasive comments from other Nigerians in the diaspora. Otoburu Okpiliya James and Steve Ushie Omagu (193) interpret Ifemelu's self-reinvention and return to Nigeria as Adichie's way of empowering Nigerian emigrants to work hard, eschewing criminal acts that have stereotyped the country.

Her homeward pull is further inflamed by her seeing in Facebook the profiles of other diasporic returnees who have invested in such areas as music production, fashion and fast-food franchise. To her, "They were living her life. 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" (17). Her successful return to Nigeria is symbolic of her cultural renaissance as she does sink her feet into her roots, discarding her diasporic garb by communicating in a Nigerian accent, reconnecting with her old schoolmates and friends, and savoring Nigerian roadside snacks.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Multiculturalism/transnationalism are fostered by Globalization, which is a renewed attempt by the West to erase the cultural distinctiveness of the nationals of less developed countries. This challenge to cultural identity is faced directly by transnational migrants from the less developed countries to the West for self-advancement – economically or educationally. The kinesis to the

West comes with blurred cultural boundaries which engenders identity compromise. Adichie's *Americanah* reveals that transnational identity or identity compromise is easily possible for migrants with a mental disconnect from the homeland. The main character in the text, Ifemelu, conversely, exhibits cultural fidelity through her mental interaction with the homeland, which enables her to negotiate her cultural identity. Mirrored in the actions of the diasporic characters

is that one's cultural identity fidelity or otherwise is a function of one's mental interface with or disconnection from the homeland. Adichie seems to be advocating cultural loyalty on the part of transnational migrants through her paralleling of the different types of diasporic characters. Her position is eloquently illustrated in Ifemelu's inexorable determination and eventual return to her homeland on the completion of her education.

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