

Complexities of Diasporic Experience and Identities in Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the complexities of diasporic experience and identities as depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*. In her novel, Adichie explores the theme of identity struggles, particularly focusing on the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in the United States. Adichie's portrayal explores the challenges faced by Nigerians and other African migrants as they navigate cultural, racial, and gender identities in the United States, in a foreign culture; the complexities of assimilation, and the longing for a sense of belonging. By analysing the characters' experiences, this paper aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of diasporic identity and the impact of globalization on these individuals. This paper investigates the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals existing between their homeland and the host country. This research paper will analyse the concept of identity, focusing on the ways in which Adichie's novel interrogates and redefines the boundaries of identity in contemporary world.

Keywords

Diaspora, migrant, third-space, hybridity, culture, race, globalization, identity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* is a thought-provoking examination of the complexities of the African diaspora and the challenges faced by immigrants in Western countries. It challenges the conventional understanding of identity as a fixed and stable category and examines the various dimensions of identity for African migrants. Recounting her own experiences of being a Nigerian in the United States, Adichie says:

Growing up in Nigeria...I knew I was black...or that I came from a group called the Negroes...but it's very different to come to the U.S....and to realize that you're something else called black, and that there are so many assumptions made because of this something else that you are.... Coming from Nigeria is quite different (*Between the Lines*).

Adichie's exploration of cultural clashes, racial discrimination, and gender expectations within diasporic communities provides valuable insight into the complexities faced by

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individuals attempting to reconcile their native heritage with their adopted culture. Her novel explores the complex and fluid nature of identity through the experiences of two young Nigerians. Set primarily in Nigeria, the story of the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze, two young lovers who are compelled to leave their home country due to their nation's political and economic turmoil. Ifemelu moves to the United States to pursue higher education and experiences firsthand complexities of navigating race and identity in a foreign land. Obinze, on the other hand, attempts to join Ifemelu in the U.S. but faces numerous challenges and ends up as an undocumented immigrant in the United Kingdom. As they move between Nigeria, the United States, and the United Kingdom, they inhabit what Homi K. Bhabha describes as "third space", a space of hybridity and ambiguity that emerges from the interaction between different cultural, social, and political domains. Bhabha emphasises that the new form of cultural identity is a radical act of cultural conversion that incorporates and transcends both the past and the present. He goes on to explain, "Such act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The past-present becomes part of necessity" (*The Location of Culture*, 7).

Adichie highlights the challenges of balancing one's cultural heritage with the pressures of adapting to a foreign environment, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of diasporic identities. As Adichie asserts in her novel, "when you cannot claim being actually African, because you'd either been in America too long or were American-born, being African was a consumable item" (*Americanah*, 175). This quotation demonstrates how the passage of time abroad can complicate one's sense of belonging and prompt them to question their cultural authenticity. The protagonist, Ifemelu, undergoes a transformative journey as she migrates from Nigeria to the United States. Subashini Navaratnam focuses on the protagonist and how she changes throughout the novel, in her paper titled "Race-in-America Is a Central Character in 'Americanah'". Navaratnam assesses the main characters, observing that at the end "they've been so shaken and turned inside out by the forces outside of themselves that they've shed and accrued different layers" (2). She grapples with her evolving cultural identity while attempting to resist assimilation.

The novel provides an unfiltered perspective on the experiences of Africans living in Western countries. Adichie delves into issues such as racism, cultural assimilation, and the surprising ways in which stereotypes and prejudices can shape everyday interactions. Ifemelu's journey as an immigrant in America exposes the struggles she faces in her pursuit of success, navigating job interviews, entering interracial relationships, and trying to fit into a society that often views her as an exotic outsider. Adichie explores the complexities of racial identities and experiences within the African diaspora. In America, Ifemelu is confronted with racial biases and stereotypes, challenging her self-perception and forcing her to navigate the intricacies of race relations in her new home. Through her encounters, Ifemelu learns to navigate the nuances of racism while grappling with her own racial identity. Adichie's novel aptly captures the impact of racism on African migrants, as Ifemelu notes, "In America, racism exists but racists are all gone" (*Americanah*, 221). This quotation demonstrates how societal mechanisms can perpetuate racial discrimination while masking it behind a veneer of progressiveness. Ifemelu encounters racial discrimination and stereotypes as

she navigates American society. She experiences the harsh reality of being a black woman in America and constantly faces microaggressions and prejudice. This makes assimilation difficult as she is not fully accepted or treated as an equal in her new cultural context.

In the novel *Americanah* we see social commentary through Ifemelu's blog posts, where she critically analyses topics such as race, beauty standards, and cultural pressures. These blog posts serve as a platform for Adichie to engage directly with the reader, providing insightful and thought-provoking commentary on various issues faced by African immigrants and people of African descent in the West. The notion of third space and cultural hybridity are central themes in the novel which explores the experiences of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman, as she navigates the complexities of race, identity, and belonging in both Nigeria and the United States. Third space refers to a conceptual space that goes beyond the binary divisions of home and host countries, where cultural identities intersect and blend. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu occupies this third space as she is neither fully Nigerian nor fully American. This third space allows her to negotiate and transcend traditional cultural boundaries, leading to the formation of a unique hybrid identity. Cultural hybridity, on the other hand, refers to the merging and blending of different cultural influences and identities. Ifemelu's experiences as an immigrant in America expose her to new cultural practices, language, and ways of thinking. As a result, she finds herself caught between her Nigerian background and the American culture she is experiencing. This cultural hybridity is reflected in her relationships, her interactions with others, and her overall sense of self. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu grapples with the challenges and insights that come with these notions. She navigates racial dynamics, experiences the cultural shock of being black in America, and confronts stereotypes and prejudices. Ifemelu's blog, where she writes about race and identity, becomes a platform for dialogue and exploration of third space and cultural hybridity, challenging conventional notions of identity and offering alternative perspectives.

Adichie's portrayal of third space and cultural hybridity in *Americanah* highlights the complexity of individuals' experiences in a globalized world, where cultural borders are increasingly fluid. Through Ifemelu's story, the novel invites readers to critically examine the construction of identity and the impact of migration on cultural exchanges and hybridization. Ifemelu's journey from Nigeria to the United States exposes her to a range of challenges as she tries to fit into the American society. Initially, she feels a sense of isolation and experiences a cultural shock, which highlights her struggle to reconcile her Nigerian identity with her new environment. Adichie depicts Ifemelu questioning her beliefs and values, adapting her mannerisms and fashion choices, and even altering her accent and speech patterns in order to be accepted by her American peers. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria after years in the United States, she realizes that her experiences and time spent abroad have changed her, making it difficult for her to fully reintegrate into Nigerian society. Cultural assimilation often requires giving up certain aspects of one's original culture. In the case of Ifemelu and Obinze, they both lose touch with their Nigerian languages and traditions as they adapt to the American way of life. This loss can create a sense of disconnection and a feeling of being uprooted from their own cultural heritage. This complex problem faced by immigrants is best captured by M. Sreelatha in her dissertation "Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction: A Thematic Study" where she

states, "People move to make their dreams real and to further their future prospects - gain financially and professionally. But while shifting to a foreign country they do not ask themselves if they will be able to adjust to the life and community there. In many cases financial security is achieved but the sense of alienation becomes deep" (2). Assimilation into a new culture can leave individuals feeling alienated and detached from both their original culture and the adopted culture. Ifemelu and Obinze struggle with feeling a deep sense of belonging in either Nigeria or America. This lack of belonging can lead to a sense of loneliness and isolation. As Ifemelu and Obinze try to assimilate, they often feel like outsiders in both cultures. They are not fully accepted by Americans due to their Nigerian background, and they feel disconnected from Nigerians who have not experienced life in America. This liminal space of being neither fully Nigerian nor fully American adds to the challenges of cultural assimilation. Similarly, Obinze faces his own challenges when he attempts to immigrate to the United States but is denied a visa, revealing the barriers and frustrations that many immigrants encounter in their pursuit of a new identity.

Adichie also examines the longing for a sense of belonging that many immigrants experience. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paul Freire analyses the effects of alienation on experiences of individuals and remarks, "At one point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and their way of life...in their alienation the oppressed want at any cost to resemble their oppressors, to imitate them and follow them" (33). The protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze, both struggle with their Nigerian identity in America. They feel torn between their Nigerian roots and the American culture they are trying to assimilate into. This duality creates a sense of confusion and can lead to an identity crisis. Ifemelu and Obinze, although successful in their respective endeavours, both feel a deep yearning for their homeland, Nigeria. Adichie portrays their longing for Nigeria as a reflection of their struggle to find a place where they are understood and accepted. This theme of longing and nostalgia highlights the difficulties immigrants face in maintaining their cultural identity while trying to adapt to a new culture.

The novel also touches upon the complexities of gender roles and expectations within diasporic communities. Adichie explores the challenges faced by African women as they navigate expectations from both their native cultures and their adopted societies. Through her characters, Adichie highlights the ways in which gender intersects with race and cultural identity, creating additional layers of complexity.

Conclusion

Overall, Adichie's portrayal of identity struggles in *Americanah* delves into the challenges faced by immigrants as they navigate the complexities of assimilation, the longing for a sense of belonging, and the cultural conflicts that result from living in a foreign country. By exploring these themes through the characters of Ifemelu and Obinze, Adichie sheds light on the nuanced experiences of Nigerian immigrants in the United States and the universal human struggle for self-identity. Adichie's vivid storytelling, her exploration of complex themes, and her ability to provide social commentary make the novel a significant contribution to contemporary literature. It challenges readers to question their own preconceived notions about race, identity, and the immigrant experience, while presenting a powerful and engaging narrative.

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